

Her Master's: The Experiences of Mature Women in Postgraduate Study

by

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**Declaration**

I hereby declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfilment of the degree Master of Education at the University of Fort Hare is my own original work and has not been submitted to any other university. All references to other work have been acknowledged.

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December 2008

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The co-researchers: I gratefully acknowledge the contributions made by my co-researchers. They know intimately the journey that this thesis has taken. Without them it would not have been possible. I only hope that I have been true to their voices.

My family, Robert, Melissa and Ryan: Thank you for your support in helping me to complete this work. Another thesis would be required to go into all the details, but I still don't think it's safe for me in the kitchen.

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### **Abstract**

This study explored the experiences of mature women undertaking Master's degrees at a Historically Disadvantaged Institution of Higher Learning in South Africa. Attaining a Master's degree is a significant milestone in education and the process may take from one to three, or more, years. The study aims to describe aspects of the women's experiences of their research journeys and the goal of the study is to present descriptions of these experiences.

The methodology is qualitative and uses a critical feminist approach, appropriate to exploring the research questions. A critical feminist stance holds that women experience the world differently to men given the patriarchal structure of society. Emphasis is placed on the primacy of the co-researcher's perceptions of their experiences. A single method research design was followed using semi-structured interviews.

The analysis resulted in the emergence of a number of central themes. Together these reflect the experiences of the co-researchers, although they did not automatically share all the experiences. The findings show that postgraduate study, in the form of a Master's degree, was found to be transformative, meaningful and worthwhile, although not without difficulties; mainly the demands required of multiple roles within home, community, work, and the university. This study contributes towards the larger body of research within education, in particular in the understanding the experiences of mature women within the field of postgraduate study.

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## **Chapter 1 - Introduction**

This research is an exploration of the experiences of mature women students, who have recently completed Master of Education degrees part-time, at a Historically Disadvantaged Institution (HDI) of Higher Education in South Africa. Recently should be taken to mean students having graduated during the period 2006 to 2008. Martinez Aleman and Renn (2002, p. 209) note an increase in women attending Higher Education Institutions "later in life". It is these later in life students or mature students that this research takes as its focus. In the South African context there is a significant gap in the available knowledge related to the subjective experience of women, especially mature women (Walker, 1998). Petersen and Gravett (2000, p. 171) note that "academia has to a large extent ignored women's experiences . . . and focused primarily on the experiences of men." In addition, Thomas (1990) writes that analyses tend to merely conclude by noting that few women go to university. They do not examine what happens to these women who proceed to higher education. This study attempts to begin to fill this dearth.

"Women have the right to equal opportunities and society in turn depends on their full contribution in all fields of work and aspects of life" (Freire, 1974, p. 1). In line with Freire's thinking, the Constitution (South Africa, 1996) places the advancement of women's rights very prominently on South Africa's political agenda. Significant transformations in South Africa on political, economic and social levels since the first democratically elected government came into power in 1994, have resulted in change or potential for change in

most South African's lives (Hyde-Clarke Humphries, 2000; Petersen & Gravett, 2000). These changes have had consequences on many people's roles, particularly women (Kok & Van der Westhuizen, 2003). In South Africa, the policy focus is on redress to women, particularly black women. Access has opened in Higher Education in terms of Affirmative Action strategies and women are one of the so-called "previously disadvantaged or marginalized groups" in terms of Higher Education Institution's equity policies included in the National Plan for Higher Education (Boughey, 2004; Chisholm, Motala & Vally, 2003; Maharasoa, 2001). The other designated groups are blacks and disabled people. The promotion of women in research is a national priority and this is spelled out in both the National Plan for Higher Education and the National Research and Development Strategy.

The South African government committed to the adoption of the Beijing Declaration. One of the Beijing Declaration's twelve areas of concern, all of which take as their purpose the advancement of women, is the area of the education and training of women (FWCW Platform for Action, Education and Training of Women, 2005). However, research shows that women in Southern Africa remain a vulnerable, marginalized group that is yet to enjoy equality in status and access to services and resources (Naidoo & Kongolo, 2004). From this we start to see the gap between political will and resultant policy-making and the implementation of these policies. Brooks (1997, p. 60) notes that "considerable doubt remains about how effectively this [implementation] is being translated into practice" which shows reservations

about the advances in implementing Equal Opportunities Policy that universities in many countries have introduced.

Boshoff (2005) reports that the academic culture is male dominated and Chisholm et al., (2003) note that the composition of the academic staff in higher education remains largely male and white. The pool of suitably qualified postgraduate candidates for remedying this situation remains small and innovative strategies to improve this situation are necessary (Chisholm et al., 2003). Badsha (2001) notes that women make up only 30% of the academic staff nationally. In order to improve these numbers, the number of women with postgraduate qualifications needs to grow. For this to happen the breach between policy formulation and effective implementation needs to close.

Badsha (2001) reports that a fundamental feature of the South African context is that, now that there are progressive policies in place in all areas, the emphasis should shift from policy development to policy implementation. Education is a complex area, dealing as it does with the historically "old" South African fragmented structure, requiring many infrastructural changes. According to Badsha (2001) one feature of this complexity, which is also found throughout the public sector, is the capacity to deliver services. These gaps in delivery are especially visible in Higher Education which has moved from previously having 36 institutions to the present 23. Institutions are managing simultaneous change at many different levels, such as information management systems, future planning, changed funding arrangements and all

the while ensuring quality is maintained (Badsha, 2001). In addition, institutions have to address poor student through-put and drop-out issues, as well as race and gender equity balances.

The question that this research focused on is exploring the experiences of mature women in postgraduate study. It is hoped that understanding these experiences, and using this information to inform both policy and practice within Higher Education Institutions, will result in the increase in the production of qualified women in the pool of potential academic staff.

Motala (2003, p.403) notes that 'gender equity entails meeting women's and men's needs' and further that within Higher Education evidence demonstrates 'an apparent insensitivity to gender issues in practice if not in principle.' Policies and laws alone cannot ensure equal rights and the full participation of women. Raising consciousness is a way of ensuring that women know their rights and are enabled to take part in the world of academia. As Motala (2003) affirms, gender equality should not be a matter of mere words or 'principle' (p. 403). Rights on paper must be translated into practice or real rights. I concur with Brabeck (2000, p. 10) who states that 'good intentions are not enough.' It is my contention that an exploration of the experiences of mature women students will raise awareness and understanding regarding women's needs. In addition, the findings could provide evidence as to whether policy is influencing practice in terms of women's experiences within Higher Education Institutions.

Literature from North America and Great Britain reveals that more women than men achieve Master's degrees, but that more men proceed to achieving doctorates (Benn, Elliot, & Whaley, 1998; Martinez Aleman & Renn, 2002). One of the related hopes of this research is, through the exploration of the experiences of women students during their Master's studies, to possibly shed light on why more women do not proceed to PhD or doctoral level, a requirement for advancement within academic institutions.

### **1.1 Feminist Science**

One of the features of feminist science, according to Cosgrove and McHugh (2000) is the goal of empowering women by understanding the world from a woman's perspective. Thus, a study of women by a woman would conceivably not be complete without resonating with and acknowledging feminist influences and writings that are relevant to this exploratory work. There are many varieties of feminism (Beasley, 1999; Evans, 1995; Gillis & Munford, 2003; Grant, 1993; Letherby, 2003; Reinharz, 1992) and it is *feminisms* that facilitate a contextualisation of the experiences that are described. This research is a direct feminist question focussing on women's experiences. However, I do not intend to be drawn into dichotomous women/men and same/difference debates, as this is not the focus of the study (Oakley & Mitchell, 1997). The individual experience of each of the participants is the focus of this research journey. However, I am alert to the

impact and consequence of common experiences, in order to be able to make recommendations in the light of the findings of the study.

It should be noted that the fact that the research was carried out with women and by a woman does not automatically qualify it as feminist. Letherby (2003) holds that what makes research feminist is not the commonality of gender but rather a common agenda, namely the liberation of women. Thus, the way in which this research has been structured, conducted and analysed situates the work in a feminist paradigm.

One of feminism's projects is to focus on women as a "subject" of research (Beasley, 1999, p. 117) while at the same time raising issue with the concept of subject, preferring the term, "participant" or "co-researcher". Within this research study, I refer to the participants as co-researchers since they are the creators and originators of the knowledge and should be acknowledged as such.

Gamble (2001) considers education to be a key issue for all feminists, as it is vital in order to access economic independence, power and self-respect.

Feminism recognizes education both as a site for struggle, and as a tool for change-making (Briskin & Coulter, 1992). This means that Higher Education institutions are both the context within, and the instrument through which, women can advance academically, economically and personally in terms of equality, autonomy and self-worth.

Feminism also raises questions about *what* women are being educated for. Gamble (2001, p.222) notes feminism's scepticism at the benefits for women entering institutions 'still heavily dominated by men and male values.' Gamble, (2001, p. 222) cites Virginia Woolf who writes, "Do we wish to join that academic procession or don't we? On what terms shall we join that procession? Above all, where is it leading us, the procession of educated men?" Excellent questions to be kept in mind in this study when describing the experiences of women who have joined "the procession of educated men". The gendered structure of academic institutions in South Africa, referred to by Petersen and Gravett (2000, p. 1) as "an enclave of male domination" is key to contextualising the experiences of the co-researchers.

## **1.2 Race and Gender**

In South Africa, given the apartheid legacy where access to education was deliberately discriminatory, it is understandable that in terms of equity, issues of race are usually at the forefront (Sawyer, 1994). However, this focus on race can lead to the possibility of women's rights being subsumed by a focus related to issues of race, that include men and women. If issues of gender are not given prominence, this could lead to a continued imbalance in terms of gender equity. It can be argued that gender is a critical analytical lens through which social institutions, such as universities, in South Africa can be explored.



However, an analytic lens which leaves race out is limited and possibly misrepresenting in its representations of South African universities and their student body (de la Rey, 1997). Although South Africa is popularly called the "Rainbow Nation," a term used freely in the media which reflects this country's focus on issues of race and to symbolise the diversity of South Africa's cultural, ethnic and racial groups (Baines, 1998, p. 1), this study intends to be conscious of both race and gender in pursuing its objectives.

In closing the Institutional Cultures and Higher Education Leadership: Where are the Women? Conference (Institutional Cultures & Higher Education, 2008), the declaration on women in higher education leadership was presented. An important part of this declaration was an acknowledgement that issues of race and gender cannot be viewed in isolation, that the experience of women in higher education is not homogeneous and that higher education is both an agent and object of change. This study recognises these points and takes them as crucial assumptions in undertaking the research.

### **1.3 Purpose of the Study**

The aim of this study is to explore important "moments" in mature women's experiences of postgraduate study, specifically the Master's degree in order to contribute to a more in-depth understanding of women's experiences in their full spectrum and foster increased understanding of the issues confronting them. The choice of topic emerged through my own studies and experiences

as a mature student, as well as through reading Glazer-Raymo (1987, p. 250) who notes the paucity of research concerning women students.

In raising awareness around the experiences of women in higher education the study will create a space for postgraduate women students to be heard (Belenky, Clinchy, Golberger & Tarule, 1986). The study will also add to the growing body of research in Higher Education, in particular addressing issues of women's postgraduate persistence and completion rates; both of which have implications for addressing equity issues within Higher Education.

Educating women has far-reaching results within families, communities and, ultimately, nations. According to Kwesiga (2002), basic education ensures women's survival, but higher education promotes empowerment, equality and, influence. Mathipa and Tsoka (2001, p. 6) refer to well-known phrase that says 'Teach a man, and you teach only an individual, but teach a women, and you teach the nation.' While this research does not presume to be 'nation-changing' it does however add to the body of research concerning the status of women's higher education.

A qualitative research design using in-depth, semi-structured interviews has been utilised in order to co-create the women's narratives. These narratives encompass the personal views and perceptions of individual students about their motivations for undertaking the degree, their significant experiences, important influences and helpful resources. These shared experiences provide insight into the range of students' perceptions regarding the demands

and stressors, as well as rewards and successes, existing within the arena of postgraduate study at higher education institutions. It also enhances our understanding of how individuals in higher education experience postgraduate study in the form of the Master's degree.

#### **1.4 Research Questions**

The specific research questions to be answered by this research are:

- What motivates mature women students to embark on postgraduate study in the form of a Master's degree? Part of this question encompasses important issues around expectations of the degree.
- How do mature women students experience the complex process of postgraduate study within daily life? Within this question, an important issue to be explored is how academic life influences and is influenced by family life, relationships and roles in the domestic sphere. In exploring tensions between "academic" and "private" life, it is anticipated that a fuller or, as Geertz (1993) notes, thick description of the lived experience of the women will be achieved.
- What emotional highs and lows do the students experience? Exploring episodes of euphoria and despair provides contextualised insight into the women's experiences. In addition, it provides insight into particular

obstacles experienced, as well as what or who was particularly helpful during the period of study.

- How do students feel about themselves on completion of the degree?  
Exploring aspects of this question could provide information on how the degree has impacted on the self-concept of the women.
- What can universities do to support mature women students in undertaking higher education? Information from these answers will provide insight into how equity in education policies, designed to support women in education, can be translated into action in the lives of these women.

## **1.5 Significance**

The answers to these research questions are of both theoretical and practical value. Theoretically, little is known about the experiences of mature women postgraduate students in South Africa. Practically speaking, Higher Education Institutions are called to be increasingly accountable in terms of finances as well as reaching equity goals. It is therefore important to develop an understanding of mature women's experiences and concomitant needs to ensure both persistence and completion in terms of their postgraduate degrees.

The significance of the study is that it will:

- Contribute to a more in-depth understanding of women's experiences within postgraduate study;
- Foster increased understanding within the university of the issues confronting women postgraduate students;
- Assist universities to support mature women to establish themselves within the academic realm, thereby achieving more than tokenism in terms of equity policy implementation;
- Raise women's awareness around issues regarding postgraduate study; and
- Encourage more women to pursue postgraduate studies, at Master's, Doctoral and Post-Doctoral levels

## 1.6 Rationale

The National Advisory Commission on Innovation (NACI) (2006) produced a report which noted that increases were evident among women postgraduate students. The National Department of Education has policy *on paper*, in the form of the National Plan for Higher Education which encourages further education of women and other so-called previously disadvantaged or marginalised groups (Boughey, 2004). I hope that this study of the voiced experiences of mature women students will contribute to a more effective implementation in practice of this policy.

## **1.7 Ethical considerations**

The following measures ensured that the research proceeded in an ethical manner. An introductory letter regarding the study was faxed or e-mailed to potential co-researchers (Appendix A). The introductory letter covered the standard ethical requirement of ensuring the informed consent of the co-researchers.

Prior to the data collection process, verbal consent was obtained from the women regarding their participation in the study. This included their consent to record the interviews held. Assurances that the materials would remain confidential through the allocation of pseudonyms, and that the results would be published anonymously, was explained when discussing the research with the co-researchers. In addition, the co-researchers were assured that they could withdraw from the study at any time (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Brabeck, 2000).

One of the assumptions of the research was that, being postgraduate students themselves, the co-researchers would have prior knowledge and understanding of the research process and the various methods employed.

## **1.8 Limitations**

From a mainstream approach, the study's limitations include the possibility of a biased sample and the non-generalizability of its findings. However, the

purpose of the study was to hear the depth and richness of each woman's experiences. The small and localised sample approach taken within this study means that the findings will not be generalised to a larger population, but rather contribute to a body of knowledge within the research field of Higher Education (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Henning, 2004).

### **1.9 Delimitation or scope of the study**

The study was limited to four mature women students who recently completed Master's degree studies at a Historically Disadvantaged Institution of Higher Education in South Africa. All the students undertook their studies part-time within the Faculty of Education. To explore their experiences, reliable information supporting the study was best obtained from those who are the focus of the research, the women themselves.

Lemmer (1992) refers to mature women students as comprising an extremely heterogeneous group with all the attendant difficulties of composing a profile. However, this study did not attempt to assume that the co-researchers have a common identity or experience. Martinez Aleman and Renn (2002, p.379) write of "women describing their own lives" and this descriptive study must be understood to be a "snapshot" of women's lives at a certain time in their lives. Jansen, Herman and Pillay (2004, p. 1) refer to these certain times as 'significant moments'. In gathering this album of experience, I have attempted to identify collective images in presenting a descriptive and complex collage of life as a mature woman postgraduate student.

### **1.10 Thoughts to take on the journey**

Current National Minister of Education, Naledi Pandor (Badsha, 2001) affirms the strengths of South African women, who, she says, "have always been recognised as astute social actors". By this she is referring to South African women's actions, historically against apartheid and presently, as they fight daily against poverty and mounting abuse and violence in their endeavors to achieve equality within society. Government has often called for "united action to ensure a better life for all" (Mbeki, 2000, p.6) and then-President Mbeki has acknowledged that government has not yet achieved the necessary progress towards gender equity. While waiting for government to act, it is incumbent upon women to take action to ensure their progress and development towards equality across the spectrum of society.

The process of research is often referred to by using the metaphor of a journey (Jansen et al., 2004; Mouton, 2001). As I embarked on the process of this research study, I identified with this metaphor, particularly in light of the fact that undertaking a Master's degree takes at least two years of part-time study. A journey implies an expedition of some length as opposed to a day-trip. A journey requires careful planning and a map of the route, which in the case of this thesis, was the proposal.

Mature women students who have embarked on the journey of postgraduate study should be acknowledged for this action. However, it should be noted that this study is not intended to be a one-sided parody of trial and tribulation,



or what Harding (1987, p.5) refers to as the 'victimology' of women's experience. It is hoped to be a narrative of triumph within and through trial; tenacity over testing; and being frank and realistic about those areas within which difficulties and struggles have not been overcome. Petersen and Gravett (2000) refer to positive experiences and Griffiths (2001) speaks of a victory narrative which is required in order to provide hope of the possibility of social justice. Although the Petersen and Gravett (2000) and Griffiths (2001) research studies referred to were carried out in the areas of the experiences of South African academic women in the first case and of women and race relations in the other, I feel that the concept of the victory narrative is also eminently suited to this study of mature women students.

### **1.11 Thesis Outline**

The thesis is divided into five chapters with this Introduction, explaining the background to the research, constituting Chapter One. Chapter Two is concerned with a review of literature in order to ascertain an understanding of the feminist paradigm as well as the body of knowledge pertaining to the research question. Included in this, is a succinct survey of international literature from Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States of America, in addition to related South African literature. Chapter Two should provide a scaffold from where we proceed to the experiences of the lives of mature postgraduate women within the milieu of Higher Education Institutions.

Research Methodology, including the research methods used, recruitment of co-researchers, and collection/creation and analysis of data, is the focus of Chapter Three. The methodology proposed to facilitate the creation of the answers to the research question, is explained in three parts. The conceptual structure discusses the qualitative and feminist aspects of the study. The research design, exemplifying the conceptual structure, focuses on narrative accounts obtained through the method of in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The subsequent section details the implementation process of the research design.

Chapter Four presents the co-researcher's responses to the interview questions which make up their stories. In addition, it provides my initial analysis of the data. Emergent themes are the indicators of the co-researcher's experiences. These themes provide a response to the research question within the scope of the study.

Chapter Five draws the study together in a discussion of the co-created findings with reference to the literature. It includes recommendations made in the light of the research undertaken. A discussion of the limitations of the study and suggestions for future research is also presented.

Relevant documentation, providing supportive and background information, are included in the Appendices.

## **Chapter 2 – Literature Review**

Ontologically, this study is based on the qualitative understanding that meaning is socially constructed, that people or the human mind can be a source of meaning and that research findings are created not discovered (Maree, 2007). In addition, one of the assumptions from which this research proceeds is that all experiences are affected by context. This research recognises that life is embedded within a cultural, historical and economic context. For practical purposes, this literature review has been delimited to three interrelated areas:

- Feminist theory, which forms the epistemological basis for the research;
- A broad sweep of the international and national context of higher education;
- Pertinent research findings regarding women and postgraduate study;

The review of the literature proposes to give an overview of what the relevant published literature reflects about the context of Higher Education, as well as various issues linked to mature women's experiences of postgraduate study. The literature forms the basis for the development of the research in order to explore the data. It also provides the conceptual tools for analysis of data.

There are many possible ways of organising the literature related to this research study. I have chosen this particular way in order to access themes arising from the literature in order to demonstrate in part the broad arena in

which mature postgraduate women's lives are played out. Themes have been extracted in order to provide possible themes with which to view the co-created findings of this study.

It should be noted that these are nominal departure points. As the research unfolds, it becomes apparent that the areas are intertwined and overlap. Pertinent definitions of relevant terms are given, where this will clarify the language and terminology.

## ***2.1 Feminist Theory***

Feminism differentiates gender from sex. Gender is a socially constructed identity while sex is the biological state of being either male or female (Stanley & Wise, 1993). Feminism is an umbrella term for a range of views about injustices against women. According to Brooks (1997) feminist theory has made a considerable contribution to research on women's educational experience.

This study is positioned within feminist writings as these are what I consider to be the foundation from which to explore and describe the research question relating to women's experiences. The review does not propose to write a history of feminism but rather draw broadly on the relevant feminist perspectives which frame the research. The controversies within feminisms are beyond the scope of this study and I do not plan to debate contested

feminist principles and standpoints (Harding, 1987; Letherby, 2003; Stanley, 1990).

Women's voices have been silenced by discourses of patriarchy, gender, culture and, in South Africa, also by the history of apartheid (Coetzee, 2001; Hyde-Clarke Humphries, 2000). In addition, feminism holds that patriarchy perpetuates a system of male domination at the expense of women (Letherby, 2003; Reinharz, 1992). One of the aims of feminism is to correct these imbalances by promoting an alternative way of viewing life and validating women's experiences.

According to Cook and Fonow (1990) the principles of feminist research relate to a focus on the transformation of oppressive environments and the empowerment of women. They note that feminist research is not on or about women, but rather for and with women. Acker (1998) adds that feminist research should result in new understandings of the gendered nature of organisational structures, practices, policies and interpersonal interactions that perpetuate unequal power, rewards and opportunities.

Arriving at an acceptable definition of feminism, or of what it is that constitutes feminist research, is problematic. Multiple standpoints, contexts and positions of different kinds of feminisms make this extremely complex. As Gillis and Munford (2003, p. 5) succinctly note: "Feminism does not exist. But feminisms do." The reading that I have undertaken has led me to take a pragmatic stance and to agree with Letherby (2003) that it is not necessary to

have one theory of feminism, as long as I explicate what it is that I mean by my use of feminism within the context of this study.

'Womanism' is the term American black feminists use to refer to the type of patriarchal oppression unique to black women (hooks, 1994; Gillis & Munford, 2003). This is the preferred term over the term feminist, which holds Western connotations which it is felt privileges white women (Collins, 1999). The arguments between womanism and feminism are beyond the scope of this study. However, they do provide further insight into the complexities of gender and race within the research.

It is extremely important to explicate clearly what I mean within my definition of the feminist theory as it is utilised within this body of research. Feminism as a concept is founded on the belief that women are equal to men and as such are entitled to the same privileges and rights (Evans, 1995; Letherby, 2003; Reinharz, 1992). Past feminist research into "women's ways of knowing" will guide the conceptual framework of this research (Belenky, et al., 1986, p. 4).

Feminism takes issue with the socially constructed standards that have fostered ideologies, stereotypes and pervasive norms that have dictated, in true patriarchal style, to women the roles that are most suitable for them. These norms have played a direct part in the creation of a gendered divide within Higher Education, particularly in certain so-called "masculine" fields. For example, McLean (2001) specifies that "Technology is simply not a role

suitable for women" and reports that there are many areas within Higher Education still not considered to be an appropriate "place" for women, mainly within the so-called 'hard' sciences.

According to Beasley (1999, p. 117) there is no final answer to the question, "What is feminism?" However, for the purpose of this study I have chosen a social constructionist framework with its basis in human rights, equal access and an emphasis on reform (Beasley, 1999, p. 51). Overlaying this framework are post-modern influences (Evans, 1995, p. 81) which stress the plurality of women's experience and refute homogenous concepts of women.

Grant (1993, p. 157) holds that effective feminist theory needs to answer the question "Does the research reflect women's experience?" This is one of the questions used as a guide during the undertaking of the research that I took very seriously, continually asking myself whether I was being true to the co-researchers through the methods, analysis and discussion related to the research. This reflective process is one area that feminisms are all in agreement with.

"Woman" as a concept is often highly contested within feminisms (Evans, 1995; Letherby, 2003). It is vital that any research should qualify what is meant by "woman" in order to avoid essentialising meaning. Essentialism is defined by Grosz (1990) as the attribution of a fixed or set essence to women, which is fraught with problems as there are many differences between women both within a single culture, as well as between cultures. Postmodern

feminism postulates that women's experiences differ and provides the basis from which to address both the similarities and the contradictions in women's lives and to develop theories as to how these can be understood collectively (Evans, 1995; Gamble, 2001; Grant, 1993; Letherby, 2003). Cosgrove and McHugh (2000, p. 815) note that "feminist research methods might help us to better understand women's experiences without essentialising or universalising those experiences." It is important to retain the concept of woman for purposes that serve the advancement of the equality of women. In other words, we use the term "woman" for strategic reasons, while working within a theoretical basis that accepts the idea of the possibility of many realities. Brah (1993) puts it well when noting the wide acceptance of the view that woman is not a unitary category. According to Brooks (1997, p. 5) 'women's experience of the discourses of the academy is not a "unitary" experience and is intersected by factors such as race, ethnicity, class, age and nationality.' In avoiding essentialising, I acknowledge, along with Letherby, (2003, p. 57) that "we do not share one single un-seamed reality."

However, Walker (1999, p. 69) confirms that "women do share experiences across cultures, albeit not in some unitary or essentialist way." Further, that either overstating differences or ignoring them "arguably offers neither political nor intellectual support in confronting oppression and may well overlook such oppression in ways which hardly serve women well" (Walker, 1999, p. 69). This supports the idea of using women as a unifying category in order to present a representation of, in this case, the experiences of mature women in postgraduate study.



A question asked from a postmodern perspective is “Whose experiences are excluded?” (Beasley, 1999; Evans, 1995; Reinharz, 1992). Given the vast and heterogeneous population of women students and the relatively small scope of this study, particular focus was not given to the many identifiers that abound such as differences in sexual orientation, disability, class, language, and ethnicity, amongst others. Wisker (1996) notes that there is not enough attention paid to lesbian, Black and Asian experiences or the experiences of women with disabilities. In addressing the experiences of mature women I address a narrow selection from a marginalized group whose experiences are often excluded within mainstream research in particular and society in general (Martinez Aleman & Renn, 2002; Reinharz, 1992). In the context of this research in terms of age, mature women will be defined as being aged 35 and over (Maguire, 1996).

Dworkin, as cited in Evans (1995, p. 160), explains that feminism proposes “the individuality of each human soul . . . what belongs to her as an individual, in a world of her own.” The research question addressed by this study involves dialoguing with the co-researchers and describing aspects of that “world”.

## ***2.2 Higher Education Context***

McClintock-Comeaux (2006) notes that academia started as an institution for men with the legal exclusion of women from higher education. Virginia Woolf wrote ‘men have been educated at universities for 600; women for 60 years’

(1938, p. 17). Males were believed to have superior intellectual knowledge and abilities to women (McClintock-Comeaux, 2006). In describing women they were referred to as the gender of 'fruitful wombs and barren brains' and as recently as the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, an obstetrics textbook wrote that 'a woman has a head too small for intellect but just big enough for love' (Hayes, p. 35, 2001). Universities were equally active in their hostility to the inclusion of women and kept them out until late into the nineteenth century. When access did open up it was partial and highly restricted on the grounds of class and race as well as gender. Cambridge University in the United Kingdom allowed women students from the 1870s but only awarded women degrees from 1948 (David, 2004). While the first white woman students enrolled at Rhodes University and the University of the Free State (UFS) in South Africa in 1904, it took until 1969 for the first woman professor to be appointed at UFS (Pretorius, de Villiers Human, Niemann, Klink & Alt, 2002). In South Africa, the situation was much worse for black women (Sawyer, 1994).

Higher education institutions are traditionally seen as the training ground for intellectual capacity and skills development in a country (Boshoff, 2005). Sall (2000, p. 5) notes that it is not enough to increase access for women but also to increase the "chances of their success." Bloch, Beoku-Betts and Tabachnick (1998) write that there should be a combined policy approach which promotes women's developmental goals. In considering these issues, in the ensuing pages, an investigation into the Higher Education context in which women are immersed during their postgraduate experiences is undertaken. In addition, the review looks at a number of broad issues

surrounding women in Higher Education, changes in education policy and changes in policies at universities (Chisholm et al., 2003; Fransman, 1992; Kok & van der Westhuizen, 2003; Petersen & Gravett, 2000). This includes information relating to the academic pathway, as well as specific information regarding the Master's degree.

### ***2.3 The International and National Context of Higher Education.***

The landscape of higher education is intricate and multifaceted. Burgess (1997) notes the complexity of postgraduate education that includes the changes in student profiles to include more mature students, more women students, more foreign students and more disabled students.

Much research focuses on neophyte university students and investigates issues such as either drop-out or poor performance at a first year level (Harvey, Drew & Smith, 2006; Shields, 2001; Whitman, Spendlove & Clarke, 1985). While these studies with novice undergraduates are important, in terms of the new funding policy for Higher Education Institution's and the higher subsidy attracted by postgraduate students, it seems to be a financial imperative for universities to also spend time and resources to ensure that postgraduate students experience success with their studies. The success of postgraduate students would lead to universities increasing their income, increasing their research output and capacity and increasing the pool of potential qualified academic staff for employment within Higher Education Institutions.

In the United States, graduate education is usually divided into two main areas: the Master's degree and Doctoral study (Martinez Aleman & Renn, 2002, p. 307). The path taken to a Master's degree in South Africa usually follows the attainment of an initial undergraduate degree, followed by an honours degree, depending on the faculty concerned. In some cases, students without recognised university degrees are allowed access into a Master's degree through a process called Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) or Ad Eundem Gradum (AEG). These are the non-traditional pathways allowing for unusual circumstances such as particular work and life experience that, according to the Higher Education Institution, constitute sufficient credit and recognition towards access into a Master's degree. Postgraduate qualifications are the accepted route into an academic career at Higher Education Institutions in South Africa. Thus, a lack of postgraduate qualifications is a serious impediment to women who desire to follow an academic career path.

There is dearth of research related to women and postgraduate study. Of course, historically speaking women have only been allowed access into postgraduate study relatively recently in comparison to men. Virginia Woolf wrote that "Women had a long struggle to persuade the universities that they had the brains which would enable them to pass examinations" (Encel & Campbell, 1991, p. 20).

In terms of the international context of higher education, there are many similarities and differences in the milieu for higher education in South Africa

and internationally in countries that share the Commonwealth ties such as Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. Martinez Aleman and Renn, (2002) note that the marginalization of women is a global phenomenon and that similar patterns of inequity can be found in various countries such as Great Britain, Canada, Australia and South Africa where, although socio-cultural and political circumstances differ, the conditions for women in higher education are remarkably similar. In addition, there is a historical sharing of Commonwealth roots in all the countries, albeit at different times in their history. A brief review of the conditions in Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States and South Africa follows. From this review a list of themes has been extracted and will be used to provide potential themes through which to view the co-created findings of this study.

### **2.3.1 *Australia***

Similarities between South Africa and Australia, as noted by Chesterman (2001), include the impact of globalisation, dramatic technological change, amalgamations, financial pressures, growing emphasis on quality, increases in student numbers and introduction of equity legislation. As a result of research undertaken in the area of women's continued inequality in Higher Education, Chesterman (2001) notes that Australian policy responses have developed. According to Chesterman (2001) these policies are having an affirmative effect on the neglect of women's potential within Higher Education. In Australia, varied research studies into women's experience in academia have been undertaken (Brearley, 2003; Kenway & Bullen, 2003; Kerlin, 1997;

McCormack 2004; Redpath, 2004). In the main, reasons for the inequity and lower status of women are given as the masculine culture of institutions, entrenched discrimination in the allocation of work responsibilities and references to the impact of late entry, career breaks and domestic responsibilities on women's research capacity (Chesterman, 2001).

Kerlin's (1997) study on women's experience of Doctoral study is important in terms of noting the barriers experienced by women in undertaking postgraduate work. Brearley's (2003) study on the experience of undertaking postgraduate research provides insights into the idea that the research experience can be a fertile ground for learning about self. Brearley (2003) also notes that supervisors should remain aware of the emotional dimensions of the research experience and the potential for supervision to be both traumatic and transformative. The study notes that higher education infrastructure needs systems of reflective learning and mutual support in order to develop and deepen practice both as supervisors and students. Although both the Kerlin (1997) and the Brearley (2003) studies took the process of Doctoral research as their departure point, it can be argued that the application of these findings to the process of undertaking Master's research is pertinent.

In terms of some of the research that has taken place, Kenway and Bullen (2003) explored aspects of the role of gender in shaping international women postgraduate students' experience of intercultural study. However, Kenway and Bullen (2003) took as their focus the students' understanding of

themselves as “other” in a different culture, which is not directly related to this study. In making women the focus of the research study, it is clear that the issues that women face are being taken seriously and as a cause for research.

McCormack (2004) undertook an exploration of women's understandings about the institutional requirements of postgraduate research. The results showed gaps between what was expected by the university and what was understood as required by the postgraduate students. This breach of understanding has an impact on the on-time completion of higher degrees. On-time completion is an important aspect both in terms of the student's persistence as well as the financial implications of through-put for the university. The importance of transparent institutional requirements comes to the fore in McCormack's (2004) study. Ensuring that students are aware of requirements would possibly create a more welcoming and responsive institutional climate for students.

The University of Melbourne instituted the University of Melbourne Post graduate Association (UMPA, 2006) which provides a platform to address the perceived needs of women in higher education. In particular, the UMPA “recognises that the culture of the University can sometimes be hostile or indifferent to the needs of women, and reduces the ability of women postgraduates to flourish as full and equal members of the academic community” (UMPA, 2006, p. 3). In addition, the constitution notes that negative experiences of higher education can have “significant long-term

effects for women, shaping self-esteem, career aspirations and the sense of belonging in society and the public domain" (UMPA, 2006, p. 6). According to the constitution, the factors which affect women's participation in postgraduate study fall into several broad categories: financial problems and/or access to resources; issues relating to university culture; supervision problems; lack of role models; and structural and systemic discrimination. Further the constitution refers to "Double Disadvantage Groups" - women who are disadvantaged through more than one circumstance and one of these groups is mature- age postgraduate women. The Australian research makes visible the issues and obstacles experienced by mature women postgraduate students within higher education infrastructures that recognises in theory the complexity of these lives (UMPA, 2006).

### **2.3.2 *United Kingdom***

In the United Kingdom the situation regarding research and women in Higher Education is meagre. According to Brooks (1997), there is a dearth of women within the Higher Education sector in the United Kingdom. Concurring with this statement, Wisker (1996, p. 90) comments that "women are under-represented in higher education, even in the current post-feminist climate when many people claim there is no need to assert that equality must continue to be striven for."

Thomas (1990) notes that a different way of looking at higher education within a university, is as a system that prepares men to take up roles of power



in a man-centred society. Although women make up over half the general population, in higher education, Thomas (1990) notes that, they are very definitely in the minority. Thus, not only is current research focussing on women within higher education, but it is also directing attention to investigating possible reasons for the number of women undertaking higher education being fewer than is representative of the general populace (Thomas, 1990). Both of these factors are a concern from a feminist perspective and support the justification for this research study.

As noted, in the United Kingdom, women students are a minority in postgraduate research and it is reported that mature women postgraduate students report a sense of loneliness or isolation during the research process (Conrad & Phillips, 1995). It is recommended that institutions need to provide micro-strategies for improving postgraduate supervision and a setting that is supportive of groups (Conrad & Phillips, 1995). In addition, Conrad and Phillips (1995) advise that faculty encouragement of the formation of groups within a Master's programme to provide an environment in which students themselves set up supportive pair or group relationships to enhance their research. In closing, they note that because women are still in the minority in postgraduate study and are far from forming a "critical mass" in institutions that have been male-dominated, institutions need to work urgently to provide a supportive climate specifically for women.

Merrill's (1999) study aims to understand the experiences of mature women students in universities. The study does not focus particularly on Master's

degrees but on mature women following a path within undergraduate study. While this study provides valuable insight into the undergraduate focus taken, it does not take the particular and demanding aspects of a research degree into account. However, Merrill (1999) does emphasise the heterogeneity of mature women students and points out the error of assuming a commonality of experience among mature women students. An important finding within Merrill's (1999) study is that the lives of the majority of women were characterised by a juggling of roles.

Sperling (1991) states that mature women wishing to enter higher education, experience a number of structural barriers such as meeting family and domestic commitments alongside those of study. In addition, Sperling (1991) notes an initial lack of self esteem and self confidence among mature women students. In order to support mature women students, policies alone will not accomplish what is required and it is recommended that universities make changes to assist mature women students with the basic domestic and logistical problems that they are faced with (Sperling, 1991).

Davies, Osborne and Williams (2002) report a number of barriers that emerged within the reality of mature women student's lives. In particular, financial costs of study, the number of roles required, time management issues and commitments related to caring were reported. Likewise, Reay (2003) demonstrates issues related to women juggling extensive working commitments or childcare and domestic responsibilities with studying. These findings concur with those of Moss (2004) who writes that women entering

higher education are involved in a continuous effort to make space and time for their studies.

Osborne, Marks and Turner (2004) point to the gendered expectation that women still had the major care responsibility for their children. For those with working partners the children and household were deemed "women's work" and the studying was an extra to be fitted in. The study documents women students who make considerable efforts to fit everything into busy compartmentalised days which include multiple roles of responsibility, comprising emotional and financial burdens. In addition, although institutional statements offer expressions of accessibility and flexibility, the reality in some institutions is that mature students are not a priority (Osborne, Marks & Turner, 2004).

From the information based on United Kingdom research, it appears that mature women postgraduate students face multiple barriers, of a personal and public nature, in institutional climates that are not accommodating in practice of the complexity of these lives.

### ***2.3.3 United States of America***

In the United States, a number of studies focussing on women's academic experience have been undertaken (Babcock & Laschever, 2003; Carlson, 1999; Martin, 1997; Meadow Orlans & Wallace, 1994; White, 2005). Frost and Taylor (1996, p. 21) note that perceptions of conflict between family and

career roles seem to be the norm in the United States and report that women have to 'juggle priorities and deal with the tensions and trade-offs associated with having to perform competently in many spheres.' The research findings of Meadow Orland and Wallace (1994) tell of similar common themes that surface from women's narratives. While acknowledging the uniqueness of each woman's experiences, it is useful to attend to these themes. The first theme reported was the experience of mixed feelings of intellectual self-confidence and inadequacy at various times of the educational process. A second important theme related to difficulties in integrating personal and professional worlds, referred to in other studies as the burden of multiple roles. Although this study was undertaken in the Sociology Department, within a Humanities faculty, there is some merit in using the findings as a point of departure when analyzing the interview narratives within my particular research study.

Feelings of isolation and loneliness are also a part of the reported graduate experience. Many women graduate students report feelings of isolation and difficulty in integrating family and professional responsibilities (Beyond Bias and Barriers, 2006).

Martin (1997) notes that a "chilly climate" exists for women in higher education, the varieties of which are broad and numerous, ranging from lecturer-student interaction, to reinforcing negative stereotypes of women and telling "jokes" which imply that men are more competent than women.

The American Association of University Women [AAUW]. (1999) takes as its departure point the educational transitions as experienced by men and women and looked particularly at the interaction of education and other life changes such as marriage, divorce and parenthood. The study is very broad in its approach, accessing information from what is referred to as a heterogeneous population of women, not merely 18 year old school-leavers. The reported findings, it is noted, can help to reconceptualise the identity and needs of the "student" (AAUW, 1999, p 4).

In reporting the findings related to goals and aspirations, it is noted that women have a dual agenda for undertaking further education namely, career reasons and self-fulfilment. In terms of career aspirations, economic benefits are cited and in terms of self-fulfilment, notions of personal enrichment and intellectual development are explored. Whether or not this is a "dual agenda" is arguable, since career aspirations and the economic benefits that are expected could also fall within the broad parameters of self-fulfilment. In addition, the automatic assumption that higher education leads to economic benefits is open to question and requires further exploration and research (AAUW, 1999).

Regarding reported obstacles and barriers, the report provides a broad outline of the many obstacles faced by women students in higher education (AAUW, 1999). Money matters are reported as a significant barrier. In addition, academic performance anxiety is a noteworthy finding. Time constraints are also described as being an issue requiring a flexible approach by higher

education institutions. In terms of possible solutions, the report noted that the following were needed:

- More financial aid
- Employer incentives
- Improved information provision by institutions
- Institutional flexibility in terms of time
- Day care services

The AAUW (1999) report provides an interesting vantage point from which to view the exploration undertaken by this research study.

Padula and Miller (1999, p. 334) refer to 'frustrations and difficulties' especially related to time, stress, exhaustion and a lack of understanding by family and friends. In addition, in terms of relationships, strain and difficulties in maintaining intimacy is reported (1999).

Syverson's (2002) research shows that the average number of dependents is two for both Master's and Doctoral students. Graduate students with dependents tend to be women, and they are older than graduate students without dependents. Studies undertaken in the United States show that many Higher Education Institutions are turning to mentoring and family-friendly policy implementation in order to keep women academics within the so-called "pipeline" (Córdova, 2005). White (2005) refers to the so-called "pipeline" theory, which holds that a large number of women undergraduates and graduate students would, over time, yield larger numbers of women at the

highest academic ranks. This indicates recognition by these Higher Education Institutions of the contribution that women can make within the academic arena and how important it is that these women are provided not only with access, but also the environment conducive to their growth and development to the top ranks of academia. However, White (2005) notes that there is evidence to suggest that the pipeline is "leaking", in terms of women leaving the academic world, or that women's progress is being obstructed or blocked. The reasons for this situation are given as:

Gender discrimination: Discrimination is rooted in terms of notion that some work belongs to women and other work does not and that intellectual work falls into the latter category.

Women's Multiple Roles: Caring for the family, in terms of continuing childrearing responsibilities and caring for other members of the family such as aging parents, takes much of women's time away from academic work.

White (2005) suggests specific steps as a way to begin addressing Higher Education Institution conflicts. These steps include an acknowledgement of the pressure women experience as a result of family commitments and an undertaking to promote supportive policies. Further literature related to the Higher Education context, includes Gamble (2001, p. 223), who proposes that the university system be "dehierarchized" and that curriculum issues concerning women be addressed along with the support offered by appropriate provisions being put in place.

#### **2.3.4 South Africa**

Higher Education in South Africa has undergone fundamental changes in the past 10 years, notably in the way that it is funded (Boughey, 2004). Apart from the obvious shift in the political landscape since democracy with the resultant changes in policies affecting higher education, funding formulae have changed. Increasingly, universities are being expected to be much more financially accountable than in the past. Thus, mature women's success is inextricably linked to university's success.

In the South African context, it is important to ask the question: "What about race?" Walker (1998) explores the racial and gendered realities within South African and attempts to explain the marginalisation of women in South African universities where male and masculine carries greater cultural prestige, and where the gendered economy and gender divisions in private lives shape and constrain academic selves, but where race has been and is a central carrier of power. Gender, cultural and racial stereotypes are embedded in patriarchy and according to Fiske and Ladd (2004), from a policy perspective, racial equality is the overriding issue, given the racial structure of South Africa's education system during apartheid. Fiske and Ladd (2004) also note the other dimensions of educational equity, one of them being gender equity. Mncube (1991) notes that it is important to acknowledge that the oppression of women in South Africa is not only a consequence of conquest and white domination. In particular that, although apartheid formed a highly oppressive



form of subordination of black women, elements of patriarchy exist in African culture and belief systems. Thus, black women are doubly oppressed.

Ballard (2003) notes that only taking gender as the point of departure creates the denial of the importance of race issues. Therefore, in order not to minimise the reality of the historical racial segregation of the apartheid and colonial eras, the exploratory study will allow themes of both a gendered and racial nature to unfold in a "grounded" approach to the analysis and discussion. Analysis is said to be grounded when it emerges from and generates explanations of relationships and events that reflect the experiences of research participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Fiske and Ladd (2004) refer to the policy paper issued by the government in 1997 which had a set of goals with the aim of changing the landscape of post-apartheid higher education with regards to 'size, structure, governance and funding.' Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education refers to the challenge in South Africa as being to redress past inequalities and to transform the higher education to serve a new social order, to meet pressing national needs and to respond to new realities and opportunities. In 2001 the National Plan for Higher Education was approved in order to implement the goals of the 1997 legislation. Some research has been carried out to assess how institutions and individuals experience these new policies and these will be examined below.

In a South African Education Policy review, (Chisholm et al., 2003) reference is made to the Report of the Gender Equity Task Team which recognises the wide gap between “rhetorical commitments and actual practices” in South African education. In reporting on the results of the oppression of women, Coetzee (2001) writes of “decades of exclusion from superior positions in inter alia education.” Boshoff (2005) refers to the 1997 the White Paper on Higher Education (Department of Education 1997, 20) which recognises that “the composition of staff in higher education fails to reflect demographic realities. Black people and women are severely underrepresented, especially in senior academic and management positions.”

A Forum for African Women Educationalists South Africa (FAWESA) Review of the experiences of women in higher education in South Africa, shows that women continue to be underrepresented, despite an overall increase of the number of women in academic institutions (FAWESA, 1995). McLean (2001) reports that women are insufficiently represented among the ranks of full professor at South African Higher Education Institutions; a situation which is apparently a global phenomenon, since females constitute only 8% of the total of United States professors. Figures for South Africa indicate that 10% of the academic staff ranked as professors are female (Hyde-Clarke Humphries, 2000). A minimum of a Doctorate or equivalent is required to ascend to the position of professor. If women are not progressing through the levels of postgraduate study, the number of women professors cannot be expected to improve.

According to Petersen and Gravett (2000, p. 171) 'academia has to a large extent ignored women's experiences . . . and focused mainly on men's experiences.' Martin (1997, p. 2) further notes 'Higher Education's relative silence and misrepresentations when it comes to women.' Within past research, the disregard and misrepresentation of women and also the domestic duties of family, parenting and care that society has associated with them, has allowed knowledge to be constructed which is in critical need of being examined from feminist perspectives.

McLean (2001) refers to higher education as having an assimilationist policy. Women are expected to conform to the masculine institutional structure as it is and fit in where society continues to expect women to be – in the "soft, womanish" fields of study. In addition, career guidance counsellors often direct steer women away from science careers in sciences, into areas deemed more suitable for women, such as education and the arts (McLean, 2001).

According to Theron (2002) there are five major factors that govern the circumstances of women in academia. These factors are listed as "limiting definitions of career and career development; women's multiple responsibilities; the changing constructions of academic work; masculinist institutional cultures; and the absence of a supportive network among women" (Theron, 2002, p.10).

## **2.4 Themes**

The themes arising from this review of the literature have been extracted and discussed in the following section in order to provide potential themes with which to view the co-created findings of this study. However, it must be noted that although these findings from literature provided a lens from which to view the findings, I maintained a grounded approach to emergent themes arising from the data which may either be contradictory or provide new insights into the topic (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

### **2.4.1 Motivation for Undertaking Master's Study**

One of the questions asked by this research relates to the reasons why mature women choose to embark on postgraduate study. It is assumed that a person's motivation for doing something has a powerful effect on the process and experience thereof. In the literature, there are a number of reasons provided for mature women's return to study and these studies note that the experiences of and reasons for women returning to study vary (Aisenberg, 1988 ; Belenky, et al., 1986; Bloch, et al., 1998; Lemmer, 1992; Petersen & Gravett, 2000; Sall, 2000). Hughes (2002, p. 95) notes that "Education provides the promise of transformation: either economic and/or the retrieval of one's latent potential" for women "returning" to education. Martinez Aleman and Renn (2002, p. 249) write that "older women return to the Academy to fulfil their dreams and concentrate their efforts of personal and professional development." It would appear that what motivates women to embark on

postgraduate study varies but that two related goals are those of self-fulfilment, as well as career development.

#### **2.4.2 Life-Role Conflict**

I seldom have one hour undisturbed. Men can shut themselves up for days with their books. What do they know of the troubles a woman must surmount to produce something half tolerable? (Elizabeth Stanton, as cited in Watkins, Rueda & Rodrigueux, 1998).

To continue their education many women overcome tremendous obstacles, juggling huge workloads and sacrificing personal time. Balancing, juggling, navigating and weaving are some of the metaphors used to explain the multiple roles that women hold (Hughes, 2002; Kok & Van der Westhuizen, 2003; Letherby, 2003). Walker (1998 p. 340) notes that 'in Black and White South African households, domestic obligations are shouldered by women.'

According to many studies, one of the overriding issues for mature women in higher education is the process of managing time amidst conflicting responsibilities that generally result in anxiety and tensions (Lemmer, 1992; Letherby, 2003; Petersen & Gravett, 2000; Sall, 2000). Research within this area indicates that the concept of life-roles is one that is of importance within the experience of the participants. Letherby (2003, p. 37) refers to the 'multiple burdens of home and work' assigned to women, while Sall (2000, p. 7) speaks of the 'dual burdens' of women. Martinez Aleman and Renn (2002) note that trends in North America show that women take longer than men to complete their postgraduate studies. They further note that women undergo

stress from competing demands on their time and resources. In addition, they add that women do not have the same support structures as men. In terms of women's responsibilities, Kok and Van der Westhuizen (2003) refer to women's multiple roles as family members, parents, community members, workers and students. Hughes (2002) notes that women who return to education, are often wives and mothers. Hughes also notes that paid work and education become additional to the women's domestic responsibilities (2002). The women experience pressure to maintain their 'overall performance in all their roles' (Hughes, 2002, p. 113). As a consequence they "juggle" their commitments and as Hughes notes, this 'juggle' can become a "struggle" and in fact lead to a tiring triple load of responsibilities; paid work, domestic responsibilities and education (2002, p. 113).

A powerful African figure of speech reads 'Musadzi u fara lufhanga nga hu fhiraho.' This is a Venda saying which means that women are forced to hold knives by their sharpest edge. Phendla (2004), in her study on women educators, refers to the expression as meaning that women have to acquire strategies for holding these knives without being cut. This is related to the many roles that women are expected to fill and, and knowing how to navigate tensions within and across the personal, public and professional fields within these roles. Black women have to find the way through the stress produced by customary laws, language and culture. Thus, black women's source of domination is neither race nor gender, but a complex interaction of these factors. It seems that while white women are penalised by their gender, they

are privileged by their race (Walker, 1999). It appears that both these constructs, of race and gender, penalise Black women; a double oppression.

The theme of life-role conflict encompasses many complexities, including time resources and the notion of selfishness that women feel when they need time to complete their studies. Wisker (1996) notes that many women's energies are drained by the guilt they feel in response to what they perceived as the self-indulgence of study. Further the study indicates that women have to constantly negotiate the ongoing tensions between their domestic and academic responsibilities.

According to Edwards (1993) and Walker (1998), it is a deeply held social belief that women are responsible for everything that happens in the homeplace. This belief creates a struggle as women strive to fulfil the demands of two competing "greedy" institutions, the homeplace and academia (Edwards, 1993). Other studies refer to the concept of a triple role of community, production and reproduction; and a double shift, for women (Wolpe, Quinlan and Martinez, 1997) In terms of this study, I would argue that there are at times four competing institutions; the home, the university, the community and the workplace. The competing demands placed on women by the four institutions results in stress, guilt tension and anxiety in the women.

### **2.4.3 Financial Problems and Access to Resources**

AAUW (1999), Davies, Osborne and Williams (2002), and Moss (2004) are some of the researchers who describe the issues of financial problems and lack of access to resources experience by mature women postgraduate students. This issue could also fall under the broader theme of the life role conflict given that finances required for study could also be required to pay for needs and wants in the domestic sphere.

### **2.4.4 Supervisors**

The student and supervisor relationship within postgraduate research is very important (Bailey, 2002; Brearley, 2003; Conrad & Phillips, 1995). Bailey (2002, p. 6) notes that this relationship plays a vital part in the success of the degree process and "can make or break the postgraduate experience."

Further it is noted that "supervisors are the first in line to provide assistance, guidance and support" (Bailey, 2002, p.6). However, should this relationship break down, this could result in conflict and tension (Klomprens & Beck, n.d.).

It could be argued that the issue of supervision could also fall under the Institutional Culture theme, which is covered next.



#### **2.4.5 *The Institutional Culture***

Higher education institutions in a country are viewed as the training ground for the development of intellectual capacity and skills (Boshoff, 2005). Clearly, the institutional culture which forms the context of this development is of extreme importance (Conrad and Phillips, 1995; McLean 2001; Martin 1997; Osborne, Marks & Turner, 2004; Theron, 2002; Wisker, 1996).

The gendered structure of academic institutions in South Africa, referred to by Petersen and Gravett (2000, p. 1) as 'an enclave of male domination,' is an important means to understanding the institutional culture contextualising the experiences of the co-researchers. Changes in education policy and in policies at universities do not necessarily lead to change in practice (Chisholm et al., 2003; Fransman, 1992; Kok & van der Westhuizen, 2003; Petersen & Gravett, 2000). The prevailing institutional culture in a higher education institution can be viewed on a continuum from "chilly" (Martin, 1997) to welcoming and it is the practices of these institutions that lead students to describe their experiences along this continuum, as either welcoming or cold.

Wolpe et al (1997) note that institutional support requires institutions to change environments to ensure that they are welcoming to both women and men. Positive change of this nature entails eliminating barriers against women, acting proactively against female stereotypes and creating an enabling environment.

#### **2.4.5 Loneliness**

Brearley (2003), Conrad and Phillips (1995), Kerlin (1997) and Theron (2002) indicate that mature women postgraduate students describe being lonely or isolated during the research process. An institutional culture that does not support inclusive and supportive practices seems to engender this lonely journey.

#### **2.5 Conclusion**

The introduction to this chapter undertook to explore the literature with the intention of using it as a basis for the analysis of the co-created data, as well as providing a context for understanding the research study. The review of the literature had three functions. Firstly, to provide an understanding of the feminist paradigm within which the research is set and secondly to provide an understanding of Higher Education Institutions internationally and in South Africa. The third intention of the review was to critically evaluate existing studies regarding mature women postgraduate students, internationally and also nationally, with the aim of garnering themes to use as the conceptual tools for analysis of data.

According to feminist authors the word voice is seen as being a powerful metaphor for women's intellectual development (Belenky et al., 1986). In studying mature women's experience in South Africa, using the information garnered from the international studies as a backdrop, we can develop

responses which will provide women with the opportunity to develop their voice and increase their participation and effectiveness, as individuals and as a group, within Higher Education Institutions.

Fiske and Ladd (2004) note that the story of equity and higher education in South Africa can be seen as one of high hopes and modest progress. They note that the initial focus on equity has shifted to a more business orientated or finance focus which is concerned more with "cost control and managerial efficiency." The concern appears to beg the question "Will the price of efficiency be at the expense of equity?" In terms of this research, will the "right of access" become as Fiske and Ladd (2004) note, a "hollow privilege?" The exploration of postgraduate women's experience of their study journey hopes to provide insight into this question, through the voices of the women themselves.

### **Chapter 3 – Research Methodology**

Mouton and Marais (1990, p. 193) describe research methodology as the explanation of the 'plan of how the researcher intends conducting the research.' This chapter outlines the research methodology followed in this study.

#### ***3.1 Theoretical Framework***

According to Letherby (2003, p. 62), 'feminist research is feminist theory in action.' In this study, feminism provides the theoretical framework through which the participant's experiences can be explored and described. As a method, within this particular study, feminism involves studying a small number of co-researchers through deep engagement to make known their described experiences.

In terms of ontology, this study moves from the qualitative understanding that meaning is socially constructed and that people or the human mind can be a source of meaning. Maree (2007) refers to research findings that are created not discovered. I found it important to consider the ideas raised by Henning (2004, p. 63) who distinguishes between 'data making' and 'data collection.' Henning refers to data making since it is 'clear that data are not so much gathered or collected as constructed during the interview (2004, p. 63).' Data production or data making positions the researcher explicitly in the process while data collection implies some sort of "data" out there waiting to be pulled

together or assembled. According to Holland and Ramazanoglu (2002, p. 155) most feminist social research probably falls into the category of 'data production.'

In terms of epistemology, this study moves from the position that one way of creating knowledge is to explore people's experiences regarding certain phenomena. In other words, it is possible to explore people's constructed reality by asking them about it. Maree (2007) notes that the stories, experiences and voices of the respondents are the medium through which we explore and know reality. The importance of the role of the co-researchers is made clear by Henning (2004, p. 63) who notes that

the interviewee does not just access her memory where she collects readily available sets of ready-made information- she also selects, processes and presents the data in a certain way – thus making rather than simply 'retrieving' information from memory and merely serving as a conduit during the interview process.

Reinharz (1992) uses the term 'voice' to refer to women's told experiences. The purpose of this study is to explore the 'voiced' experiences of mature women during their journeys of postgraduate study. Hayes and Flannery (1996, p. 6) refer to 'value of women's own stories as a starting point for understanding their learning in higher education.' The research questions explored understandings women themselves ascribe to the postgraduate experience. Further exploration took place around factors and experiences as understood by women themselves to have influenced their experiences. It is hoped that, in exploring the meanings that women attach to these experiences, a better understanding of the experiences will result, potentially

contributing to enhancing the future experiences of women in postgraduate research.

De Vault (1999, p. 27) proposes that feminism is a set of beliefs that problematize gender inequality. Feminists value women's lives and concerns, and work to improve women's status. This is a broad and inclusive definition which is misleading in its simplicity and belies the complexity of feminism.

Feminists seek a methodology that

1. Shifts the focus from men's concerns to women. The point is not only to know about women and but reveal what has been suppressed by mainstream research.
2. Minimises harm and control in the research process
3. Supports research of value to women (De Vault, 1999, p. 31)

According to De Vault (1999, p. 33), feminist methods 'give voice' to women respondents. In order to access reliable information, this study produced supporting data together with the women who are the focus of the research.

Bringing women's realities into sharper focus by proceeding from a perspective that values women's experiences and drawing on these as a scientific resource is an important feminist concern (Harding, 1992). It is important to note that women's subjective knowledge is reliable and true because it directly articulates women's experiences (Brooks, 1997) and, according to Holland and Ramazanoglu (2002, p. 144) '...women's story is knowledge.'

### **3.2 The Conceptual Structure**

An explanation of important concepts follows:

*Feminist Paradigm:* According to Maree (2007) a paradigm helps the researcher to tell the story of the research by depicting a world that is meaningful, but subjective. A discussion of the complexity of the feminist paradigm within which this study is set, has been fully explained within Chapter 2. In terms of selecting methods, feminist research does not assert the primacy of any specific method but rather looks for fitness of purpose. In other words, what makes the research feminist is not the method per se, but rather the way in which the method is used. In making a choice regarding methods for this study, the guiding question was to ask what method was likely to result in the creation of data reflecting the experiences of the co-researchers. In summary, within a feminist paradigm, feminist methodology is shaped by feminist theory and grounded in women's experiences (Holland and Ramazanoglu (2002).

*Qualitative research:* A qualitative research approach is an umbrella term for a wide range of approaches intended at collecting rich, descriptive data in respect of a particular phenomenon with the aim of understanding a situation from the participant's point of view (Maree, 2007). The feminist approach to qualitative methodology views the co-researchers as the experts and allows for an in-depth exploration of their complex lived reality. 'The key concern is understanding the phenomenon of interest from the participants' perspectives,

not the researcher's' (Merriam, 1998, p. 7). This is also known as the insider's or emic perspective. The important point to note here is that the most important voices are those of the co-researchers and the aim of the study is to explore the quality of the data, not the quantity.

Reinharz (1992, p. 95) writes that feminists also engage quantitative methods in research, although there is sometimes a perception that quantitative methods, with their deductive approach, are seen not to fit within a feminist paradigm. For the purposes of this study, quantitative methods, which offer limited accounts of 'experiences' are not appropriate within the research design given the qualitative nature of the information required in order to explore the research question. The aim of qualitative research in this study is not to collate numbers, but be able to provide a thick description of each woman's experience. According to Geertz (1993) a thick description is a detailed description, which must precede any attempt at generalisation.

According to Holland and Ramazanoglu (2002, p. 146) feminist researchers 'should be reflexive about the exercise of power in the research process.' A feminist research methodology values the co-researcher's explanations in their own words and balances the power between the researcher and co-researcher or participant, a quality not usually present in quantitative methodologies. Padula and Miller (1999, p. 341) note that 'Using qualitative methods...has the potential to produce powerful and meaningful insight and understanding about women's lives and experiences.'



*Interpretive:* This study recognises the interpretive nature of research.

Mauthner and Doucet (1998, p. 51) appreciate that researchers have to interpret co-researcher's words and realise that these could be interpreted in a number of ways. It is important that there is understanding of the research process as being a finely balanced procedure between three different and at times differing stances. According to Mauthner and Doucet these are:

- (i) the multiple and varying voices and stories of each of the individuals we interview;
- (ii) the voice(s) of the researcher(s);
- (iii) the voices and perspectives represented within existing theories or frameworks in our research areas and which researchers bring to their studies. (1998, p. 51)

Mauthner and Doucet (1998) view research both in terms of process (how we do research) and product (the production/social construction of knowledge) as a journey in which these three 'voices' or perspectives must be listened to, maintained and respected.

Beyond the three 'voices' already discussed, Mauthner and Doucet (1998) also refer to the further voices of those who read and interpret texts, such as this research study, as entering the research conversation. In fact, the research conversation continues after the printing and dissemination of all research texts, which adds to the interpretive quality of all research.

*Reflexivity:* Reflexivity, according to Cosgrove and McHugh (2000), is the acknowledgement of the influence of contextual values on the scientific enterprise and of the values and assumptions of the researcher.

Mauthner and Doucet (1998, p. 53) note that this reflexivity means that the assumptions that direct our research are 'analyzed directly and self-consciously, rather than remaining unacknowledged.' In addition, it is important to note that, as the researcher, my voice 'frames' the research (Reinharz, 1999, p. 16).

Thus, a feminist stance within research does not locate the researcher as objective outsider, as is the case with mainstream research, but rather locates the researcher within the research. As a fellow, mature woman undertaking a Master's degree by research, I was located firmly within the research. This could be considered a disadvantage as it could result in what Beoku-Betts (1994) refers to a 'blindness by the researcher' who could assume an in-depth knowledge. I reflected on this idea of 'blindness' and was very aware of my own partial understanding of each woman's experience. At one stage, I wondered whether this research was actually feasible given the enormity of crystallising at least two years of these women's experiences into a comparatively short interview. However, I also realized that reflecting on issues such as this one and being transparent within the body of the research would help to balance my misgivings. My own background enabled me to some extent to identify with and value each co-researcher's contributions regarding aspects of their experiences. Disclosures about my own status as a student and the aims of the study, allowed a relationship to develop that included a rapport which resulted in a relaxed interview environment. These disclosures are also an example of researcher reflexivity (Lentin, n.d.).

In traditional, mainstream or 'malestream' research interviews are conducted according to a hierarchical framework of techniques, whereas the feminist approach to interviewing advocates a more interactive and open-ended approach in which the power-balance between researcher and co-researcher is minimised (Letherby, 2003).

At a stage during my initial reading around the research topic, I decided that a feminist, qualitative, interpretive and reflexive methodological path would be most suited to the aims of this study. As my reading developed and widened in some cases, while becoming more focussed in others, I became aware that I had found a methodology which made sense in terms of the context and aims of the research. Obviously, this is an over-simplification of quite a circuitous route. However, in the final decision-making process, the topic (experiences of mature women), was informed by the theory (feminism), which informed the methodology (qualitative, interpretive and reflexive). The methodology was thus moulded and shaped epistemologically by a feminist way of knowing and ontologically, by a feminist way of being (Letherby, 2003).

### ***3.3 The Research Design***

As indicated in the opening chapter, this study is feminist in design and conceptualisation. The research methodology formulated to facilitate the unfolding of the research is qualitative, interpretive and reflexive, as befits the qualities of a feminist study. In using a feminist approach, the researcher acknowledges candidly the possibilities of flaws within the study and the

potential for other methods to have been possibilities for the entire research process, from conceptualisation to conclusion.

Although single method research may seem inadequate to explore and express the complex lives of women (Reinharz, 1992, p. 202), as a tool for exploration this method, through its personal approach and flexibility was deemed appropriate rather than other possible approaches such as focus group interviews or questionnaires. Letherby (2003, p. 90) speaks of focus groups as small groups active in the process of reflection and construction which give insight into experiences at a certain point in time. Reinharz (1992, p. 222) refers to the focus group as a 'feminist group interview'. In terms of the research question, I felt that the focus group method takes the attention away from the individual and there was too much potential for individuals to dominate within the group which would possibility silence others. A questionnaire was viewed to be more in line with a quantitative and restricted data collecting strategy which would not align with the aims of the study.

Initially, I did plan to use multiple methods to collect data, but after reflection, I came to the realisation that, for the purpose of this research, the semi-structured interview was sufficient and apposite to facilitate the exploration of each of the participant's experiences. The method used provided insights into answering the research question that possibility would not have developed through the use of quantitative or other methods. The semi-structured guide also increases confidence that the data that is co-created will be comparable across the participants (Padula & Miller, 1999).

### **3.4 Data Creation**

Data was created with the co-researchers who consented to be a part of this research study.

#### **3.4.1 The Co-researchers**

The criteria for the selection of the co-researchers were firstly age. According to the delimitations of the study, they should be mature women which for the purposes of this study was taken to be 35 years old and older. In addition, they should have graduated with a Master's degree between 2006 and 2008.

A purposive sample of four women formed the co-researchers for this study, over a period of five months. Purposive sampling was used to select co-researchers who would serve as 'information rich cases' (Merriam, 1998, p. 61). "Information rich" cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research. The co-researchers were recruited from a Historically Disadvantaged Institution (HDI) within the Faculty of Education. The department was not chosen for any specific reason other than accessibility and the likelihood of obtaining information-rich cases.

De Vault (1999) speaks of recruiting volunteers through personal networks and this is what I have done. Permission and contact information regarding

possible candidates was obtained from the co-ordinator of the Master's course of the Faculty of Education.

Initially, I contacted the possible candidates by e-mailing or faxing a letter explaining the research study in brief. Appendix A is a copy of the letter. From a pool of twelve possible candidates, seven indicated their interest in the study. Finally, four women were able to participate in the research.

Once the positive responses were received, I then made telephone contact with each individual co-researcher in order to set up an appointment for the second phase of data collection, the semi-structured interview.

Given the South African context, it is appropriate to note that three of the women were black and Xhosa-speaking and one woman was white and English-speaking. There were no translation issues as all the women were fluent in English and I am also fluent in Xhosa. The interviews took place in English. However, some of the greetings and conversation was undertaken in Xhosa with the Xhosa-speaking co-researchers.

Each interview took approximately one hour. According to Blaxter, Hughes and Tight (1996) interviews lasting less than half an hour are not likely to be valuable and interviews going beyond an hour may be demanding and very time consuming for the co-researchers and their busy lives. In each case, the interviews were held at a time and place chosen and agreed to by the co-researchers. Pseudonyms were allocated randomly to the co-researchers in

order to keep their identities confidential. Verbal permission to record the interviews was obtained from the co-researchers.

The following table provides further details:

Table 1: Co-researcher's Biographical Details

Co-researcher	Pseudonym	Information
Co-researcher 1	Ruth	Black, Xhosa-speaking, Widow, Children
Co-researcher 2	Tamar	Black, Xhosa-speaking, Single, Children
Co-researcher 3	Rebekah	White, English-speaking, Married, Children
Co-researcher 4	Deborah	Black, Xhosa-speaking, Single, Children

### ***3.5 Implementation of Methodology***

One of the research instruments in this type of qualitative study is the researcher themselves and De Vault (1999, p. 73) advises that researchers need to listen in ways that are 'personal, disciplined and sensitive.' For the purpose of this research I chose in-depth, face to face, semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews are used in many types of studies (Bell, 1993; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Silvermann, 2000). Reinharz (1999, p. 18) notes that semi-structured interviews maximise both discovery and description. According to Greef (2002) they are deemed appropriate particularly in order to understand the world from the participant's point of view.

Interviews are a form of conversation in which someone asks a question and someone else responds. With the research interview, the conversation is turned into a research tool. Through their cooperation the researcher and participants, or co-researchers, generate a meaningful research narrative which is actually jointly authored by the researcher and co-researchers. However, the narrative should always be understood as a limited and composite picture of the participant's realities, never the whole story.

Interviews are often used in order to clarify and explore issues in qualitative research (Bell, 1993; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Silvermann, 2000). The oral interview allows women to articulate their own experiences. According to Anderson (1990, p. 103), the interview 'is a picture of how a woman understands herself in her world, where and how she places value, and what particular meanings she attaches to her actions and locations in her world.'

The flexibility of the semi-structured format allowed for the women to be able to speak about anything they felt was relevant to their own experience in relation to the questions. The focus provided by the questions also allowed me as the researcher to keep the interview on track in as sensitive a manner as possible. I prepared for the design of the interview schedule using guidelines obtained from other similar types of studies (Belenky, et al., 1986; Letherby, 2003). The interview questions were based on similar research into women's postgraduate experience, in this case doctoral studies, conducted by Kerlin (1997). The questions used in the semi-structured interview schedule



were however carefully adapted and aligned to answer the aims of my research.

Pilot testing of interview questions is recommended by many experienced researchers (Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Silverman, 2000). In order to assess the suitability of the questions for answering the main research question, a pilot testing of the questions was implemented with a Master's student, from a different university, who was not part of the identified sample. Once this pilot was completed a few changes were made and one of the potential questions was eliminated as being irrelevant. The interview schedule was used once the pilot testing was complete.

### ***3.5.1 The Interviews***

In terms of the technical issues, the interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder. This is a small, rectangular, battery-operated, recording device, measuring about 10 centimetres long and four centimetres wide. However, although small in size, the device is extremely powerful. I tested the device under various conditions and practiced saving the data recorded in order to ensure that I was fully conversant with it.

Research methods texts comment on the importance of ensuring that the co-researchers or participants are relaxed and made to feel comfortable during interviews. Very little is said of the nervousness of the researcher and I found that prior to each interview I was anxious about the ensuing process. I was

concerned that my questions were too restrictive, that I would not listen 'well enough' and that I was in fact, wasting their time.

Ultimately, it was heart-warming to realise that each of the co-researchers without exception were keen to contribute to the study. Having been involved with research interviews themselves, they were very understanding of the process. This made the interview process far more like a conversation between friends as opposed to researcher and researched. The fact that each of the co-researchers was knowledgeable about the structure of undertaking interviews was very helpful in terms of their assistance regarding carrying out the interviews. They were focussed and helpful and more than willing to share of their experiences for the reasons of the research.

Following Banister, Bowman, and Taylor's (1994) principles of minimizing power differentials, I explained my topic and the co-researchers were fully aware of the fact that this research formed the basis for my Master's in Education degree. In what is unusual for a lot of research, the co-researchers had superior educational qualifications to the researcher. In my opinion, this swung the power differential towards the co-researchers.

The interviews between us took the shape of a relaxed conversation. In all the cases, I introduced myself as a Master's student who was interested in their journeys towards their obtaining their Master's degrees. Because I was a mature woman student myself, the interviews had an atmosphere of mutual disclosure. For example, one of the women, while telling me something said,

'You know, as a researcher yourself...' There was an acknowledgement of sharing similar experiences and very quickly a sense of intimacy developed between me and the co-researchers. While interviewing the women, I was so familiar with the questions that I was able to ask them in a relaxed manner that barely required me to read the questions. This approach encouraged a comfortable atmosphere and the co-researchers appeared at ease throughout the interview process.

In undertaking the interviews, I was always aware of Hesse-Biber, Leavy and Yaiser (2004, p. 216) who note:

I stopped listening for what I could extract from the narrative and started listening to the whole person. There is no way to translate this into a methodology; it is not an attitude you can feign; but it results in the narrators feeling that they have an appreciated and respectful audience.

Being fully conscious and respectful of the co-researchers as they took time out of their lives to share their experiences with me was an important part of the research, as listening is part of the method. I did make some notes during the interviews, but tried to keep this to a minimum as I did not want to distract the women by writing down what I thought was relevant. However, my note-taking did give the women an opportunity to not have to constantly maintain eye contact with me, as they reflected on their answers to the given questions.

I feel that the interview process was assisted and enhanced by my 'insider' status as a mature woman student myself. With each of the co-researchers a bond seemed to develop located within this mutual experience of

postgraduate study. I feel that because of this bond, the women were able to share easily and freely.

I encouraged each of the women to ask questions regarding anything related to the study that they wanted to know more about. In each case, the researchers offered to be contacted again should the need arise. Reflecting on the interview process, I felt satisfied that the co-researchers responded freely to the questions and shared their experiences generously.

### ***3.6 Data Management***

The initial step in managing the data was to organise the data. In this case, it meant that the interviews were converted from the digital voice recorder to wave data files on a computer and stored both on the computer and on a flashdisk, as a back-up. New technology means that audio cassettes no longer need to be used and it is a very simple matter to make and store as many copies of the files as required. This of course could have security implications should the files not be carefully and securely stored. However, the benefits of not having to use audio tapes, which can be easily damaged, far outweigh any possible weaknesses of this system. The interviews were saved as computer files using pseudonyms, in a password protected computer system, which only I could access. These measures ensured the security of the data.

I listened to the data files a number of times while I transcribed them verbatim into a Word document within one week of the interviews taking place. To further ensure confidentiality, I was the only person to handle all raw data.

### **3.7 Data Analysis**

#### **3.7.1 Introduction**

Qualitative data analysis is a non-mathematical analytical procedure, essentially about making sense of the data in order to answer the research question. Henning (2004, p. 127) describes data analysis as 'an ongoing, emerging and iterative or non-linear process.' Holland and Ramazanoglu (2002) note that data analysis is the process of envisioning patterns, making sense, giving shape and bringing quantities of material under control.

Mauthner and Doucet (1998, p. 54) note that data analysis is a very important stage in the research process '...for it carries the potential to decrease or amplify the volume of our respondents' voices.' Confirming this, Olesen (1994, p. 167) notes that data analysis is the place where interview data must be organized into a description 'which embraces wholly the women's voices in answering the research questions.'

Ritchie and Lewis (2003) note that analysis should start at the beginning of the research process which makes sense as there should be links between the epistemology and analysis techniques. There must be a fit in the

philosophies and coherence within the study. Feminist research paradigms make transparent the vagueness that often accompanies the analysis process and situate the researcher within the subjective journey quite openly (Letherby, 2003). The generative process which is symbolic of analysis must be explicated quite clearly within the study and shared with the co-researchers in order to live out feminist research values.

### **3.7.2 Content Analysis**

Once the raw data were organised and stored, the next step was to begin the analysis. The data were analysed using a type of analysis known as content analysis. According to Henning (2004), content analysis involves three phases.

#### **3.7.2.1 Phase 1: Orientation to the data**

The first phase of the process involves orientation to the data. This requires reading to form an overview of all the data. As the researcher conducting and transcribing the interviews, I was already oriented to the data prior to this reading of all the data created. However, this stage would have been the first time that I read all of the transcribed interviews, one after the other, in order to get a holistic overview of the data.

Often, qualitative methods produce large quantities of data, or what Kvale (1996) refers to as the 1000 page answer. My awareness of this possibility

before the interviews alerted me to what is referred to by Rudestam and Newton (1992, p. 113) as 'data overload' and thus the analysis of transcribed data, drawing on interviews and notes from my research journal, was done frequently during the data creation process.

#### **3.7.2.2 Phase 2: *Working the data***

This phase involved coding segments of data for meaning, categorising related codes into groups and seeking relationships between categories to form thematic patterns. In summary, the core of qualitative analysis is a dual task. First, to select the data and second to assign it to a category, which is a process called coding (Henning, 2004, p. 129).

During this part of the process, I read the transcripts then created a new document placing each of the research questions on a clean page. Since the questions in the interview schedule were designed to answer the main research questions, essentially, I created a document which took the questions from the semi-structured interview schedule (Appendix B) and placed them in their appropriate position under the main research questions (Appendix C).

I then used the computer's cut and paste facility in order to place the answers to the questions in the relevant position. I proceeded to use the computer highlighting facility in order to identify emerging themes in different colours.

### **3.7.2.3 Phase 3: *Final composition of the analysed data***

This phase involved writing the final themes of the set of data. This was followed by the presentation of a pattern of related themes.

During this phase, I also identified relevant quotes to be used from the data which would express what I considered to be illustrative of the themes. It is important to note that classification of data is not neutral and it is purposefully guided by the research question (Henning, 2004, p. 127). In addition, the analysis depends on the researcher's perceptions and are shaped by her thinking. It is therefore possible that two researchers can identify different themes and this could result in different analyses of the same data.

I spent a long time reflecting on the data that I collected in order to analyse the experiences of the women into themes that would accurately and fairly reflect the described aspects of their research experiences, while also producing an analysis that did not distort the co-researchers lived reality. This was a task that I did not take lightly and the responsibility of making choices and decisions about how to organize the data was an onerous task. This is where I appreciated the amount of reading that I had done regarding feminist approaches. Feminist researchers and writers are very open about the subjectivity inherent in the research process and are clear about the fact that it is the researcher who decides on what to report and how to report it. I have tried to resolve my own tensions about this situation by being as open as possible about the process that I followed and the emotions that accompanied



me on this data analysis journey. In the final analysis, as a feminist researcher it is my understanding of the situation that controlled the final report (Edwards, 1993).

In mainstream research, such as Phenomenology, the researcher "brackets" his/her own experiences to avoid bias in order to understand those of the informants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In the case of this study however, an interesting aspect is the 'personal significance' of the research for me (Hayes & Flannery, 1996, p. 3). My own experience as a mature, postgraduate woman student enriches my understanding of the participant's experiences (Letherby, 2003). Denzin and Lincoln (2000) support this proposition and Henning (2004) argues that the idea that a researcher can stand as an isolated and objective party within research is not possible. Letherby (2003, p. 9) further notes that feminist research should be 'grounded in the personal.' Reinharz (1992, p. 16) supports this and adds that it is 'the researcher's voice which frames the argument.' How then, can it be bracketed? However, while making my personal connection to the study clear, I have chosen not to weave my own autobiography through the study.

There is a tension in the researcher being both a part of and apart from the texts generated by the research. However I wish to propose that this is not problematic. In fact, the establishing of a relationship with the co-researchers may sharpen the authenticity of the findings. Letherby (2003, p. 124) notes that the researcher's role as 'kindred spirit' not 'expert' can lead to a two-way

exchange of mutual support with the emphasis being that 'we are all participants' in the research.

### **3.8 Limitations**

This was a study of mature women's experiences of postgraduate study. It was not a study of a particular Higher Education Institution or degree programme. The findings from the small number of co-researchers restricts the degree to which the findings can be generalised as a whole to mature women's experience of postgraduate study.

Within this research I have indicated that feminism raises concerns over the use of the term 'women's experience.' However, in making clear the diverse nature of women, in terms of ethnicity, sexual orientation and nationality, amongst other identifiers, and delimiting the sample of co-researchers clearly, I consider this to be adequate to ensure that readers of this research will not suppose the findings to be generalised to the entire heterogeneous population of mature women. The intention here is not to make generalisations about the ways in which all mature women students experience undertaking a Master's degree, but rather to explore or illustrate the complexity of the selected women's experiences.

De Vault (1999, p. 243) notes that language is often inadequate for women and that writing is not a transparent medium with which researchers simply convey 'truth' discovered in the field. Thus the process of analysis and

interpretation is fraught with issues before we even start the research process. However, I have situated the analysis and interpretation within the understanding that it is my subjective interpretation and analysis, using language as a resource which is not without problems. This process has been carried out in the best way I know how, guided by those who have gone before me, through their writings. This analysis must be viewed within this subjective framework and I am aware, as Mauthner and Doucet (1998, p. 51) indicate, that even as I write 'every reader will interpret the text again for themselves.'

### **3.9 Ethical considerations**

Ethical considerations should ensure that the research causes no harm to the co-researchers. Reinharz (1992, p. 27) notes that ethical questions are viewed as very important within feminist research because of the sensitivity to avoid propagating and perpetuating the exploitation of women. Researchers carry a responsibility to use the information that is co-created in a manner that is not prejudicial to the interests of the co-researchers or other women.

Informed consent, considered one way through which women's rights are protected, was obtained verbally from the co-researchers (Letherby, 2003). In the initial letter sent to the co-researchers, and in my verbal discussion with them, I explained the aims of the research. In addition, I confirmed with them the voluntary basis of their participation. I assured each of the women of confidentiality regarding their participation and also included the provision for

the co-researchers to withdraw at any time during the interview. I encouraged them to ask for further explanations regarding anything about my proposed study. I consider the steps taken to be adequate in addressing any ethical concerns related to this study.

### **3.10 Conclusion**

In conclusion, this chapter has outlined the research methodology followed in this study and included a discussion on the theoretical basis for selecting a feminist, qualitative, interpretive and reflexive methodology. The research methods used, recruitment of co-researchers and the collection/creation and analysis of data, were clarified. In addition, the process of implementation of the methodology was explained in detail. The limitations of the research methodology were discussed. In closing, attention was drawn to the ethical considerations related to the study.

The following chapter develops this methodology chapter further as it covers the next process, which is the presentation of the research findings.

## **Chapter 4 – The Co-researchers and the Co-created Findings**

This chapter presents, considers and reflects on the voiced aspects of the experiences of the co-researchers. In addition, my analysis of the data is provided. The analysis of the interview data entailed an interpretive creation of the co-researcher's experiences and placed these experiences into themes and patterns. This entailed conducting and listening to the interviews which was followed by transcribing them. The next component involved reading field notes and reading and re-reading the interview transcriptions.

The final coding of the transcriptions for categories and emergent themes was facilitated by using the computer cut and past facility and a colour coding system. Categories and emergent themes are the indicators of the co-researcher's experiences. The overarching emergent themes and categories illustrate various aspects of the research questions that were posed. These themes provide a response to the research questions within the scope of the study.

In attempting to document the co-researcher's experiences of aspects of their higher education journeys en route to achieving their Master's in Education degrees, the individual co-researchers viewpoints, as relevant to the research questions raised, are presented. In presenting the data it was important to emphasise the diversity of the women's experiences, as well as the commonalities expressed in the emerging themes. The emphasis was on what the women expressed as their own experiences with their voices to be

heard and understood. Feminist research is critical of studies that claim to have captured the 'truth'. Mauthner and Doucet (1998, p. 52) note,

We can never claim to have captured the "pure", "real", "raw" or "authentic" experiences or voices of our respondents because of the complex set of relationships between the respondents' experiences, voices and narratives, and the researcher's interpretation and representation of these experiences/voices/narratives.

In undertaking my data analysis in a transparent manner and making my own subjective choices and interpretations clear, the research is careful not to make overarching claims of truth. However, in terms of the co-researchers, it does provide a way in which 'we can attempt to hear more of their voices, and understand more of their perspective' (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998, p. 52).

#### **4.1 The Co-researchers**

Four mature women students, who recently completed Master's degree studies on a part-time basis within the Faculty of Education at an Institution of Higher Education in South Africa, were the co-researchers. In order to preserve their confidentiality, they will be referred to using pseudonyms allocated to them.

Table 2: Co-researcher's Pseudonym Information

<b>Co-researcher</b>	<b>Pseudonym</b>
Co-researcher 1	Ruth
Co-researcher 2	Tamar
Co-researcher 3	Rebekah
Co-researcher 4	Deborah

## **4.2 Content Analysis**

Content analysis was used to analyse the data in three phases (Henning, 2004). Phase 1 involved orientation to the data, in the form of the transcribed interviews, to get a holistic overview of the data.

Phase 2 involved coding segments of data for meaning, categorising related codes into groups and seeking relationships between categories to form thematic patterns. The questions from the semi-structured interviews (Appendix B) provide answers to the research questions that form the foundation for this research. During this part of the process, I took the questions from the semi-structured interview schedule (Appendix B), and placed them under the appropriate position under the main research questions in order to develop an interlocked overview of the questions (Appendix C). The transcribed answers were then positioned under the appropriate questions using the cut and paste facility of the computer.

It must be noted that this was not a linear process. In some cases, answers to the questions were found within answers to others. Identifying answers to the questions therefore involved a cyclical process of reading and re-reading the transcript in order to bring together the answers to the questions.

Phase 3 of the analysis process involved writing the categories or central themes of the set of data and identifying descriptive interview extracts which would express what I considered to be illustrative of the themes. Highlighters

of different colours were used to identify emerging themes from the transcribed data.

#### ***4.3 Co-created Findings***

In order to generate the answers to the questions posed by this research a complex and non-linear process known as content analysis was followed. The specific research questions to be answered by this research were:

1. What motivates mature women students to embark on postgraduate study in the form of a Master's degree?
2. How do mature women students experience the complex process of postgraduate study within daily life?
3. What emotional highs and lows do the students experience?
4. How do students feel about themselves on completion of the degree?
5. What can universities do to support mature women students in undertaking higher education?

The questions from the semi-structured interviews (Appendix B) were posed with the intention of providing answers to the research questions. These answers form the foundation for co-created findings of this research. The findings are organised into categories and themes within categories.



#### **4.3.1 Category 1: Motivation and Expectations**

Research question 1: What motivates mature women students to embark on postgraduate study in the form of a Master's degree?

Questions 1, 2 and 3 of the interview schedule (Appendix B) relate to the first research question and cover factors that motivated the women to undertake the Master's degree and their expectations of the process. On analysis of the transcribed interview, the following themes were extracted in terms of the women's motivation for and expectations of undertaking a Master's degree:

##### **A. Thirst for knowledge**

The co-researchers indicated their need for knowledge and education.

Rebekah: I'm just one of those kind of people who thirsts for knowledge...I can't stand the fact that I don't know enough...and I firmly believe in lifelong learning regardless of age I don't think I'll ever give up.

Deborah: I must be educated. I need to try and learn more

##### **B. Personal Career Needs**

All the co-researchers referred to their work and career needs. In addition, each of their research topics was directly linked to the work environment.

Rebekah: Definitely my own needs at work...I hoped the Master's would give me some answers...main motivating fact for me was my own downfall at work. I needed some answers about what I can do about my situation...

Tamar: It was actually going to help me at work. What inspired my interest...to see what exactly was going on with certain situations with my work.

### **C. Fulfil Other's Expectations**

One of the co-researchers felt that she would be disappointing her family and their expectations of her should she not continue with her education.

Deborah: From a tender age, my parents died...[older sibling] made it up to a doctorate through difficulties...that really motivated me... even if I didn't want to study I would think I would be letting her down...

### **D. Giving Something Back**

The co-researchers spoke of their links to the community and their desire to 'give something back.'

Deborah: Dealing with the community I think the value of teaching and learning in schools has been eroded. By the time democracy was coming in most of things were neglected because of the struggle. I feel I am making up for lost time...I want to make sure that the future of our learners is sound...I want to give something back...

Ruth: I want to make a difference in the real world.

### **E. Expected Rewards**

There was an expectation of rewards or changes resulting from the achievement of the degree.

Deborah: There are incentives that go with being well educated. You're supposed to get more money but now it seems it's not like that. By the time I got my Master's I was told you are over-educated...we have paid you so much, you get nothing for your Master's...this is from the Department of Education.

Rebekah: I did believe it would have opened up more job opportunities and it hasn't. But I believe it's the education system at the moment.

Tamar: When you achieve something you expect that it is acknowledged, through incentives...money, because you work to have money and also acknowledgement in terms of promotion...I found that I could not get any money.

#### **4.3.2 Category 2: Significant Experiences**

Research Question 2: How do mature women students experience the complex process of postgraduate study within daily life?

Questions 4 and 5 of the interview schedule relate to this question. On analysis of the transcribed interview, the following themes were extracted in terms of factors regarding the women's managing aspects such as relationships and significant experiences related to the process of their studies.

##### **A. Multiple Roles**

From the data, it is clear that the issue of managing multiple roles is a difficulty for many women.

Rebekah: It becomes difficult when you try to keep a full time job and study at the same time. Full time home, full time mother, wife.

Ruth: Women have so many challenges...as you know...children... my nephew was not working and he was looking after my child.

Tamar: At times the supervisor could not understand that you are working and that you are a family person ...

Deborah: If you are a student who is working full time you are having so many problems, you've got your career to push, you got your family,

you've got your partner, there are so many things that you are working with.

Tamar: We also have an extended family and you are expected to go visit, to honour activities, honour occasions within the family. When I was a student, it was so difficult for me. It was so difficult, in fact I could not honour most of the things...because they usually occur during weekends and if you have to sacrifice to go to a funeral...you have to make sure that you make up time and the fact that you do not stay with your children you close yourself up in the room to study or have a chapter to write.

Rebekah: I had to put it [thesis] aside for family. That became family time. I have to admit there are times there were obviously times that I became selfish, when I had deadlines.

## **B. Impact on Relationships**

The co-researchers reported both positive and negative impacts on close relationships.

Deborah: Looking at the kids, it was positive they tried to give me support.

Tamar: I have a last born and this [Master's course] is something that shook our link. Immediately after our studies, I find that I don't understand him well. I felt that studying had a negative impact with my relationship with him....so the time that I spent away from home, leaving him at home either alone or with the helper or siblings it did have an impact, a negative impact.

Deborah: Looking at the kids . . . a bad experience to them... negatively I had to leave them time and again I couldn't spend the weekends with them. I had to get my education and to them it seems I have neglecting them and at times they didn't understand. Leave them coping by themselves.

Deborah: It's the same with the colleagues both positive and negative. Some really supported me a lot. Some understand that you have to be away...on leave at certain times. And also some negatives. Some think you are better educated than them.

Deborah: In terms of my partner I would say it was negative. Because of the studies we had to break up. He couldn't stand it that I had to come down to the university – it was very much demanding, and I also had to look at my career, I can't just throw away my career for a partner. And he couldn't understand it....I am more educated than him

and maybe he saw that as a... I would say he has a complex..a complex developed somewhere because he's not very well educated.

Rebekah: My immediate supervisor...for a while he made my life difficult.

### **C. Time Pressure**

That the women experienced time constraints, was evident within the data.

Tamar: Sometimes I could not keep time...I was late and sometimes I was travelling...when you don't keep time then he [Supervisor] seems not to understand.

Tamar: Studying needs more time...for yourself...you mostly get to be a loner because you've got to focus on the studies.

Tamar: You have to make sure that you make up time...

Rebekah: I don't believe the Master's was difficult...but immensely time consuming, immensely time consuming.

Tamar: I had to gather skills while I was studying and working at the same time.

#### **4.3.3 Category 3: Emotional Highs and Lows**

Research Question 3: What emotional highs and lows do the students experience?

On the interview schedule, questions 6, 7 and 8 relate to exploring episodes of euphoria and despair in order to provide contextualised insight into the women's experiences.

On analysis of the transcribed interview, the following themes were extracted in terms of factors regarding experiences. I have not categorised them

according to positives and negatives as some experiences had both of these qualities.

### **A. Loneliness**

Issues of isolation and loneliness were prevalent in the data.

Rebekah: It's also very lonely. It would have been so nice to have somebody else to bounce ideas off.

Tamar: You mostly get to be a loner, because you've got to focus on the studies...

### **B. Negative Comments**

Some of the students found that negative comments were prevalent.

Rebekah: Soon after proposal accepted, my supervisor left the university and I felt I had no direction for the rest of that year. I got another and had a fantastic relationship with the next supervisor... Then she left and at that point, was probably the lowest point I've ever come to. I thought, 'Shall I carry on? Is there any point in carrying on?' When another lecturer said to me, 'Why you carrying on? Why you doing this?' And I thought because I'm not a loser. I wasn't going to give up. And that is what pushed me, the fact that he expected me to give up. It was a negative comment ...

Prior to this during her Honours Research course, Rebekah had experienced negative comments from a male lecturer at a different university. Rebekah remembers:

My start in the honours research didn't start too well. I asked a question during class and the research professor replied, 'We can see that you are blonde.' That in itself made me think can I do this [research]?

### **C. New to Technology**

Issues related to being novices in terms of technology were raised by the co-researchers.

Deborah: I was new to technology. . . it was a new thing to us. My computer got a virus and it crashed right when I was trying to print while I was starting to print. I lost everything, I didn't have back ups. I then realized that you had to have backups....I can laugh now, but I was so depressed...when I was home I had to be admitted to hospital...it was as if my work never happened at all.

Ruth: The challenge was that I was not computer literate, I was not a fast typer...that was hard times.

Tamar: Level of computer skills was one of the things that was a disadvantage to me.

### **D. External Examiner Feedback**

The external examiner feedback was a low point for two of the women.

Rebekah: The examining process...this part was quite hard for me. I thought it [my thesis] was quite good. The one university [external examiner] said no problem.. The second one slated it. Said I was naïve and wanted me to change my entire style of writing. But by then I'd lost me. I'd lost the personal touch within the whole thesis. I had to pretty much rewrite the whole thing. I felt I lost me in the whole thing. My voice got lost en route.

Ruth: I had a problem towards the end...the other examiner was negative so I tried to make some changes...it was not easy...when you lose focus on what to do towards the end of your thesis that is demotivating.

### **E. Lack of Recognition by Employer**

The lack of some tangible recognition of the degree by the employer was remarked upon.

Deborah: By the time I got my Master's I was told you are over-educated...you get nothing for your Master's.

Ruth: I've seen the value of my research even if they do not come back to me to say this.

Tamar: When you achieve something you expect that it is acknowledged... At least a cash bonus but I was told that if you study, you study for your own.

### **F. Supervisor Relationships**

The co-researchers indicated both positive and negative experiences within the supervisor relationship.

Tamar: At times the supervisor could not understand that you are working that you are a family person ... he felt most of the time that the student was my priority...at this level...the supervisor can see through you and see that you are not doing justice...we had to quarrel at times...

Rebekah: Soon after proposal accepted, my supervisor left the university and I felt I had no direction for the rest of that year. I got another and had a fantastic relationship with the next supervisor... Then she left and at that point, was probably the lowest point I've ever come to.

Deborah: The way he supported me. He went an extra mile to ensure that I finish.

Ruth: The supervisor is your guide. If your supervisor fails it means you can't make it. Really if it was not for my supervisor giving me moral support I would not have made it.



Tamar: Actually this [Supervisor] is a friend a person who is keen to help you...at one point I was really frustrated, but because of support of my supervisor and a fellow student who got me through that.

Ruth: And if it was not for her [the Supervisor] I would have just dropped out because of the work that is needed....If it was not for my supervisor giving me moral support I would not have made it.

#### **4.3.4 Category 4: Feelings on Completion**

Research Question 4: How do students feel about themselves on completion of the degree?

Question 12 and 13 on the interview schedule explored experiences related to student's feelings on completion of the degree and explores the possibility of student's continuing on to PhD studies. The following themes were extracted:

##### **A. Self-Esteem and Self-Confidence**

The co-researchers reported that they gained self confidence and self-esteem.

Rebekah: From my colleagues point of view, I certainly gained confidence... biggest thing is that I gained confidence. I was definitely aware of the opportunities when I was young but not secure in my own abilities. I just didn't think I could. I really didn't think I could. I have confidence, like I'm not afraid to speak publicly. Previously you couldn't have paid me to speak publicly. It was a morale boost.

Tamar: it gave me that confidence also...that in fact it gave me confidence to stand up high to stand up tall. Before my studies I wasn't a person who was too confident to stand up and talk and look with an

analytic eye...I think studying has given me more of that...I can stand up and talk go into a situation and look at it analytically.

Ruth: I feel proud and confident.

Deborah: I am very much confident...

## **B. Sense of Achievement**

The sense of achievement reported by the co-researchers was prevalent

Rebekah: Any lady studying in this day and age deserves a medal...

Tamar: With us specifically blacks and secondly female that achievement even if you are not aware where it will take you as soon as I had achieved that level I felt a bit elevated within myself, within my home because they could also say hooo our mom has Master's. They felt it was also an achievement that they appreciate...it did not only do it for my self but for my family...

Tamar: I am an asset to the community...I think I'm used more by the people in the community... they can see the difference

Ruth: I feel I achieved more than just a certificate. I am a changed somebody because I didn't know that something that I have written can be used by someone else, even some of the students of the university have quoted....I feel proud and confident... I've seen the value of my research.

## **C. Improved Interpersonal Relationships**

The co-researchers also reported improvements within their interpersonal relationships:

Tamar: The experience...me with the supervisor, that experience enlightened me a bit. The role that I do at work because I have to supervise people and when you couldn't understand the supervisor it made me reflect on why I couldn't understand the people at work...it made me reflect and understand I really couldn't understand other people. That interaction made me reflect on the interaction that I had with people at work and that developed me at work. But the supervision processes really helped me.

Ruth: I have better understanding of people and how they do things...more open.

Deborah - I've changed a lot – because I've had to work with so many people and learn that each one is unique and I've had to ensure that for each one there are strengths and weaknesses. I understand people have their own views. Before I wanted things done my own way.

#### **D. Studying Further? Not just yet**

All the women responded positively to the idea of undertaking Doctoral studies in the future. However, they also clearly said that they were not ready yet.

Deborah: After finishing my Master's, I was approached to do my Doctorate and I said no. I would say I'm interested in Doctorate but I'm not ready for it. I'm so exhausted.

Rebekah: I firmly believe in lifelong learning, regardless of age I don't think I'll ever give up. I would say that a doctorate is in the pipeline but it's a very long pipeline...My daughter goes into matric next year so I am loath to start my own thing when she's in a crucial year herself.

Rebekah: It [Doctorate] is on the distant agenda- perhaps this is where a lack of confidence creeps in - will I be able to do it on this level?

Tamar: We are people's people in our communities...I do have thoughts about that [the Doctorate] at times...and then get, not frightened....but think of the time...frightened by the lot of work that one has to do...It (Doctorate) could be in the future.....

Ruth: Not next year for the PhD, maybe 2010. Now I want to concentrate on my house.

#### **4.3.5 Category 5: Support Needed**

Research Question 5: What can universities do to support mature women students in undertaking higher education?

Interview Schedule questions 9, 10 and 11 ask women directly what they think universities should do to support them in undertaking higher degrees. Information from these answers could provide insight into how equity in education policies, designed to support women in education, can be translated into action in the lives of these women. These themes can be divided into two categories according to the women's expressed practical needs and psychological needs.

### **A. Practical Needs**

Practical needs were expressed as follows:

Deborah: Financial problems are the most depressing time. You think that I am wasting so much money. ...so much that needs finances.

Ruth: Without that [financial assistance] it would have been very difficult. You get into the studies without having planned for that.

Tamar: To do justice to the study you have to be in the right library and secondly exposed to the internet.

Deborah: As part-time students, the university should ensure that there are bursaries instead of going for loans and not only for the fees. You spend a lot of money on Master's. Editing, for example. Printing, photocopying. When you come to the university it is better if you are given laptops and printers, because most of the time you are working at home. Also travelling costs...so much needs finances.

### **B. Psychological Needs**

The co-researchers indicated their need for psychological support.

Rebekah: If only that [contact sessions] could have continued throughout the period of the degree. That didn't happen any more and I missed that. I missed that tremendously. ... I suspect that had those contact sessions continued I wouldn't have had a 6 months lapse...maybe I was to blame as well...I don't believe I was blameless.

Deborah: You need to be assisted in so many things...you need a supportive framework ...because if you support your students you get students who are able to face the world. When you don't get support you just think, ' I must give up'.

#### **4.4 Central Themes**

The process of content analysis resulted in the emergence of a number of central themes, reflecting the experiences of the co-researchers. All of the co-researchers did not necessarily experience each theme. The central themes are tabled on page 93:

Table 3: Central Themes

<b>Category</b>	<b>Descriptor</b>	<b>Central Themes</b>
Category 1	Motivation and Expectations	Thirst for knowledge Personal Career Needs Fulfil Other's Expectations Giving Something Back Expected Rewards
Category 2	Significant Experiences	Multiple Role Conflict Impact on Relationships Time Pressure
Category 3	Emotional Highs and Lows	Loneliness Negative Comments New to Technology External Examiner Feedback Lack of Recognition by Employer Supervisor Relationships
Category 4	Feelings on Completion	Self-Esteem and Self-Confidence Sense of Achievement Improved Interpersonal Relationships Studying Further? Not just yet
Category 5	Support needed	Practical Needs Psychological Needs

#### **4.5 Conclusion**

Chapter 4 has provided a presentation of the co-created data using the process of content analysis. This analysis resulted in the emergence of a number of central themes. Together these reflected the experiences of the co-researchers. However, it must be noted that each co-researcher did not automatically share all the experiences.

Chapter 5 discusses the themes in relation to the literature. In addition, the chapter addresses the limitations of the study. Finally, conclusions are drawn and recommendations for future research are made.

## **Chapter 5 - Conclusions, Limitations and Recommendations**

This chapter draws the study together in a discussion of the co-created findings, with reference to the literature. The discussion also integrates recommendations made in the light of the research undertaken. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the study and suggestions for future research.

This study has emphasised the unique individual experiences of mature women postgraduate students studying part-time towards a Master's in Education degree. The qualitative research design adopted a feminist stance towards the co-researcher's shared experiences which provided the data for the study. Each co-researcher did not automatically share all the experiences. The experiences that were shared by the co-researchers showed that the studying towards a Master's in Education degree is at times an exhausting and demanding, but ultimately worthwhile, experience.

An attempt has been made to place this research study within a feminist paradigm. For example, in undertaking research that it not on or about women, but rather *for* and *with* women, the study takes a feminist philosophical stance. The reflexivity and transparency of the methodology utilised, places the study within a feminist paradigm. In addition, the research can be categorised as feminist in terms of the findings acknowledging the plurality of women's experiences. According to Beasley (1999) effective feminist theory needs to answer the question "Does the research reflect



women's experience?" I suggest this research complies with these requirements.

### ***5.1 Discussion of Themes***

It is clear from the research findings that mature women's experiences of postgraduate study are varied and reflect issues across a range of factors. Each discussion section acknowledges the reality of individual diversities, as well as the commonalities, which have been expressed as themes. The discussion is intended to draw attention to the ways in which the co-created data is consistent with claims or findings within the literature and enrich those findings through particular co-researcher's experiences. In addition, emerging themes not found in the literature are also reflected upon.

The experiences expressed by the co-researchers in this research are multifaceted. Each of the categories, organised in terms of the research questions, brings to the fore both the individual voices of each woman, while at the same time drawing attention to the thematic similarities found within the interview data. The co-created data showed the following themes in terms of the women's experiences:

#### ***5.1.1 Motivation and Expectations***

An important aspect of undertaking any type of study relates to the student's motivation for and expectations of the course to be followed. Motivation and

expectations could have an effect on student persistence in terms of completion of the course of study, in this case, the Master's. In addition, expectations could have an effect on the sense of satisfaction gained by the students and their willingness to engage in further study. The five themes created within this category are listed as:

- a) Thirst for knowledge
- b) Personal Career Needs
- c) Fulfil Other's Expectations
- d) Giving Something Back
- e) Expected Rewards

#### **5.1.1 (a) *Thirst for Knowledge***

In terms of motivation, a common thread for the co-researchers was what I have termed the 'thirst for knowledge' and how the Master's degree was believed to be able to fulfil this need for knowledge. This finding links up to the next theme which is related to personal career needs. The women noted that they needed knowledge in order to grow in terms of their personal development at work. This finding is similar to what Hughes (2002) and Martinez Aleman and Renn (2002) note in terms of education providing opportunities for women within higher education for personal and professional development. This suggestion of intellectual development is reported by the AAUW (1999) which notes that in terms of self-fulfilment, notions of intellectual development are explored.

However, the finding differs to the literature its suggestion of knowledge for its own sake as voiced by Rebekah, who said:

I'm just one of those kind of people who thirsts for knowledge...I can't stand the fact that I don't know enough...and I firmly believe in lifelong learning regardless of age I don't think I'll ever give up.

The theme of 'Thirst for Knowledge' is closely linked with the following theme of personal career needs.

#### **5.1.1 (b) Personal Career Needs**

It is notable that all the co-researchers referred to their work and career needs. In addition, each of their research topics was directly related to their work situations. This correlates with the AAUW report (1999) regarding women's dual agenda for undertaking further education namely, career reasons and self-fulfilment. In terms of career aspirations, economic benefits are cited and in terms of self-fulfilment, personal enrichment and intellectual development are explored. Tamar noted: "It was actually going to help me at work."

#### **5.1.1 (c) Fulfil other's expectations**

Deborah, was motivated by her older sister's expectations and also inspired by the sister's achievement despite heavy odds being against her. She commented that: "[older sibling] made it up to a doctorate through

difficulties...that really motivated me... even if I didn't want to study I would think I would be letting her down..."

This issue is one that emerged through this research and links to literature were, as yet, not forthcoming. It is an interesting topic that links personal goals in a very close way with family and community which would make for future research.

#### **5.1.1 (d) Giving something back**

Links to the community and a desire to 'give something back' was also a strong motivation for the black women undertaking the study. This is illustrated in part by Deborah:

*By the time democracy was coming in most of things were neglected because of the struggle. I feel I am making up for lost time...I want to make sure that the future of our learners is sound...I want to give something back...*

These links with family and the community are in accordance with the relational concept of 'Ubuntu' which is strong in African cultures. Ubuntu refers to the concept in which the individual defines themselves through the other. This reference also voices a sense of loss and of what was denied to black people by the struggle during the apartheid years.

#### **5.1.1 (e) Expected Rewards**

There was a definite expectation of rewards or changes resulting from the achievement of the degree. The AAUW report (1999) in noting women's

agenda for undertaking further education include economic benefits in terms of career aspirations. Interestingly, although in each case these expectations of either opportunities for promotion or monetary reward were not realised, and although most felt disappointment in this, they were all satisfied with the fact that they had attained their higher degrees. This was evident even though their achievement has not been recognised in any tangible way by their employers.

Tamar's comment: 'When you achieve something you expect that it is acknowledged...' raises a question, namely, *why* are the achievements not recognised? A deeper investigation into the comment made to Deborah about being 'over-educated' could indicate a belief that there is a certain maximum level to which women should be educated. This is possible, given the history of women and education (Encel & Campbell, 1991; Hayes, 2001; McClintock-Comeaux, 2006).

### **5.1.2 Significant Experiences**

Although three themes were identified within this area, it could be argued that latter two themes form sub-themes of the first:

- a) Multiple Role Conflict
- b) Impact on Relationships
- c) Time Pressure

### **5.1.2 (a) Multiple Role Conflict**

A central finding relates to multiple life role conflict. The themes emerging regarding women managing aspects, such as relationships and significant experiences related to the process of their studies, indicated that the issue of managing multiple roles is especially prevalent. This correlates to Merrill's (1999) study in which she noted that the lives of the majority of women were characterised by a juggling of roles. Sperling (1991) refers to barriers experienced such as meeting family and domestic commitments alongside those of study and also correlates with a number of other studies (Davies, Osborne & Williams, 2002; Hughes, 2002; Kok & Van der Westhuizen, 2003; Letherby, 2003; Moss, 2004; Meadow Orlans & Wallace, 1994; Reay, 2003; Theron, 2002; Walker, 1998; White, 2005). In the data, experience of this multiple role conflict is illustrated by Deborah:

If you are a student who is working full time you are having so many problems, you've got your career to push, you got your family, you've got your partner, there are so many things that you are working with.

Rebekah noted that she: "...became selfish, when I had deadlines". This comment confirms Wisker's (1996) findings regarding the guilt that women feel in response to what they perceive as the selfishness or self-indulgence of study.

The resonances of the findings of this study within the literature are especially strong, and I would argue that there are at times four competing institutions, the home, the university, the community and the workplace. The stress, guilt

and anxiety resulting from these competing demands placed on women by the four institutions is of critical importance to be taken into account within institutions developing policies for the advancement of women's higher education .

### **5.1.2 (b) Impact on Relationships**

Within the data, it was clear that undertaking the Master's degree has a negative impact on relationships. This is an important issue raised in the literature which finds links within the co-created data (Hughes, 2002; Westhuizen, 2003). Tamar's comment is particularly poignant:

I have a last born and this [Master's course] is something that shook our link. Immediately after my studies, I find that I don't understand him well. I felt that studying had a negative impact with my relationship with him....so the time that I spent away from home, leaving him at home either alone or with the helper or siblings it did have an impact, a negative impact.

This theme forms part of the multiple roles theme as Tamar perceived that the conflict between her roles as student and parent negatively impacted her child.

Of the co-researchers, only Deborah made reference to a partner:

In terms of my partner I would say it was negative. Because of the studies we had to break up. He couldn't stand it that I had to come down to the university – it was very much demanding, and I also had to look at my career, I can't just throw away my career for a partner. And he couldn't understand it....I am more educated than him and maybe he saw that as a... I would say he has a complex....a complex developed somewhere because he's not very well educated.

In terms of traditional roles assigned to women, it is significant that Deborah valued her career over what she gained from the relationship with the partner.

### **5.1.2 (c) Time Pressure**

It became very clear in the course of analysing the data that the women experienced issues related to time constraints. Making time, sacrificing time, catching up time and having enough time are all voiced. Rebekah commented: "I don't believe the Master's was difficult...but immensely time consuming, immensely time consuming." Tamar noted: "You have to make sure that you make up time..."

The time issue is also one which can be linked to the over-arching theme of women managing multiple life roles and having enough time to satisfy the many roles. This reflects the study by Moss (2004) who noted that women in higher education are caught up in an unremitting effort to make time for study. These findings concur with studies by Lemmer (1992), Letherby (2003), Petersen and Gravett (2000), Sall (2000) and Wisker (1996).

### **5.1.3 *Emotional Highs and Lows***

Episodes of euphoria and despair were explored in order to provide contextualised insight into the women's experiences. On the whole, the women concentrated on reporting on emotionally low experiences, except for



the issue of the supervisor relationships which garnered positive feedback.

Six themes are explored:

- a) Loneliness
- b) Negative Comments
- c) New to Technology
- d) External Examiner Feedback
- e) Lack of Recognition by Employer
- f) Supervisor Relationships

### **5.1.3 (a) Loneliness**

The issue of isolation and loneliness during the research process were prevalent in the data. Rebekah noted, 'It's also very lonely. It would have been so nice to have somebody else to bounce ideas off.' This corresponds with the views found in Brearley (2003), Conrad and Phillips (1995), Kerlin (1997) and Theron (2002). This issue could have an effect on the motivation of students. Without psychological support, there is the possibility of non- or delayed completion. Tamar commented, '...at one point I was really frustrated, but because of support of my supervisor and a fellow student who got me through that.' In addition, Deborah shared that, 'When you don't get support you just think, 'I must give up'.'

In order to redress this situation of isolation, contact sessions are suggested:

Rebekah: If only that [contact sessions] could have continued throughout the period of the degree. That didn't happen any more and

I missed that. I missed that tremendously. ... I suspect that had those contact sessions continued I wouldn't have had a 6 months lapse.

### 5.1.3 (b) Negative Comments

The import of remarks made by those in positions of authority within universities should not be overlooked. Staff should be sensitised to this issue.

Rebekah noted the negative comments from a male lecturer:

Soon after proposal accepted, my supervisor left the university and I felt I had no direction for the rest of that year. I got another and had a fantastic relationship with the next supervisor... Then she left and at that point, was probably the lowest point I've ever come to. I thought, 'Shall I carry on? Is there any point in carrying on?' When another lecturer said to me, '*Why you carrying on? Why you doing this?*' And I thought because I'm not a loser. I wasn't going to give up. And that is what pushed me, the fact that *he expected me to give up*. It was a negative comment ...

Prior to this during her Honours Research course, Rebekah had experienced negative comments from a male lecturer at a different university. Rebekah remembers:

My start in the honours research didn't start too well. I asked a question during class and the research professor replied, 'We can see that you are blonde.' That in itself made me think can I do this [research]?

The use of negative remarks and calling upon gender stereotypes when interacting with students is not professional in any sense. However, the resilience shown by Rebekah is notable as she continued with her studies in spite of, and indeed in the first case cited because of, the negative comments.

This finding resonates with Martin's (1997) study as well as research undertaken by Fiske and Ladd (2004) around the importance of institutional

culture. In terms of higher education policies, negative comments of this nature are anathema and strict measures should be taken against those who make them. In the particular case cited, it was fortunate that Rebekah was not disheartened by the comment but that the comment spurred her on to finish her studies. However, the possibility of being demotivated by such a comment also exists.

### 5.1.3 (c) New to Technology

Deborah: I was new to technology. . . it was a new thing to us. My computer got a virus and it crashed right when I was trying to print while I was starting to print. I lost everything, I didn't have back ups. I then realized that you had to have backups....I can laugh now, but I was so depressed...when I was home I had to be admitted to hospital...it was as if my work never happened at all.

Ruth commented, 'The challenge was that I was not computer literate, I was not a fast typer...that was hard times.' Issues related to difficulties in managing the technology were referred to by the co-researchers and this was a theme which was not raised in the literature that was covered in terms of this study.

I reflected on the possibility that this could be a remnant of the results of the inequalities of the South African Education system, given the fact that only the black women found the technology daunting. This seems to be confirmed by the use of the word 'us' in Deborah's comment that 'I was new to technology. . . it was a new thing to *us*.' However, it could also not necessarily be linked to only gender. Perhaps in this case race is the overarching issues given that superior access to resources is located in the so-called white schools. This

could also be an issue of rural versus and urban environment. Further research is needed before valid reasons can emerge. However, technology skills are an issue requiring serious attention from higher education institutions.

### **5.1.3 (d) External Examiner Feedback**

Rebekah: The examining process...this part was quite hard for me. I thought it [my thesis] was quite good. The one university [external examiner] said no problem.. The second one slated it. Said I was naïve and wanted me to change my entire style of writing. But by then I'd lost me. I'd lost the personal touch within the whole thesis. I had to pretty much rewrite the whole thing. I felt I lost me in the whole thing. My voice got lost en route.

Ruth: I had a problem towards the end...the other examiner was negative so I tried to make some changes...it was not easy...when you lose focus on what to do towards the end of your thesis that is demotivating.

A low point for Ruth and Rebekah was the external examiner feedback. This is an issue also not raised within the literature. However, I think it is an issue which Higher Education Institutions should take careful note of. A lack of confidence in the assessment process could have far-reaching results for student submission and completion rates.

### **5.1.3 (e) Lack of Recognition by Employer**

A definite issue raised by the co-researchers was the lack of recognition of their achievements by their employer, the Provincial Department of Education.

Deborah said, 'By the time I got my Master's I was told you are over-educated...you get nothing for your Master's.'

This kind of reaction could de-motivate students from undertaking further study and careful note should be made by employers in general, and government departments, in particular to ensure a system of recognition is implemented.

### **5.1.3 (f) Supervisor Relationships**

Supervision is of principal importance to the Master's students, both in their supportive roles as well as their support of the growth of the women's research abilities. There are many references in literature to the importance of supervision (Bailey, 2002; Brearley, 2003; Conrad & Phillips, 1995). The findings within this study were indicative of the complexity of interactions between human beings. The co-researchers indicated both positive and negative experiences within the supervisor relationship and it is clear that the quality of supervision is a lynchpin for a successful Master's degree.

Tamar felt that her supervisor, a man, sometimes did not understand the complexity of her situation and the number of responsibilities and roles that she was expected to carry out within her community. Tamar noted,

'At times the supervisor could not understand that you are working that you are a family person...he felt most of the time that the student was my priority.'

Ruth felt that her supervisor, who was a woman, was very understanding of the situation. Although the supervisor was still demanding of her in terms of the work on the thesis, the student felt that she understood the pressures that she was under and was encouraged not to 'drop the studies.' Ruth stated:

And if it was not for her [the Supervisor] I would have just dropped out because of the work that is needed....If it was not for my supervisor giving me moral support I would not have made it.

However, these examples are not meant to infer that women students should only be allocated women supervisors. It would be simplistic to say the issue of supervisor understanding of women students is only related to gender. This is illustrated by Deborah who noted, 'The way he supported me. He went an extra mile to ensure that I finish.' Tamar, the student who noted that her Supervisor did not understand the many roles she had also said:

Actually this [Supervisor] is a friend a person who is keen to help you...at one point I was really frustrated, but because of support of my supervisor ...got me through that.

Overall, all the co-researchers felt that their supervisors and the faculty staff had their best interests at heart and spoke highly of the support and assistance given to them. In Rebekah's case, it was not the issue of the *quality* of the supervision relationship mentioned but the fact that two of the supervisors that were appointed to her left the employ of the university.

Rebekah: Soon after proposal accepted, my supervisor left the university and I felt I had no direction for the rest of that year. I got another and had a fantastic relationship with the next supervisor... Then she left and at that point, was probably the lowest point I've ever come to.

An important aspect evident from the analysis is the importance of supervision. All of the co-researchers made reference to this. Supervision

serves an important supportive function that should not be ignored by universities. Attention and focus should be given to the development of Supervisors in order to provide optimal support to the Students.

#### **5.1.4 *Feelings on Completion***

On completion of the degree, the student's feelings resonate with a victory narrative (Griffiths, 2001). The findings show that the 'higher' higher education context, in the form of the Master's in Education degree, provides growth opportunities for women. In particular, improved confidence, technical skills development, enhanced human relationships and an increase in self-esteem were reported. Five themes were created from the data:

- a) Self-Esteem and Self-Confidence
- b) Sense of Achievement
- c) Improved Interpersonal Relationships
- d) Studying Further? Not just yet

#### **5.1.4 (a) Self-Esteem and Self-Confidence**

The co-researchers reported that they gained self confidence and self-esteem which correlates with and the notions of self-fulfilment in the literature (AAUW, 1999) Rebekah noted, '... biggest thing is that I gained confidence... I have confidence, like I'm not afraid to speak publicly.' Tamar said,

'It gave me that confidence also...that in fact it gave me confidence to stand up high, to stand up tall. Before my studies I wasn't a person

who was too confident to stand up and talk and look with an analytic eye...I think studying has given me more of that...I can stand up and talk go into a situation and look at it analytically.

This growth in confidence appears to lead women to believe in themselves and to grow in areas they did not believe possible before achieving the higher degree. Areas such as public speaking clearly illustrate a growth in confidence and self-belief.

#### **5.1.4 (b) Sense of Achievement**

A sense of achievement was strongly present in the findings. Rebekah noted, ' Any lady studying in this day and age deserves a medal...'

Ruth: I feel I achieved more than just a certificate. I am a changed somebody because I didn't know that something that have written can be used by someone else, even some of the students of the university have quoted [my work]...I feel proud and confident.

In addition, the black co-researchers reported a sense of achievement that went beyond personal achievement, but made links to how this achievement was linked to their communities, as well as being black. Their gender did not occupy the priority position. Tamar noted:

*With us specifically blacks and secondly female that achievement even if you are not aware where it will take you as soon as I had achieved that level I felt a bit elevated within myself, within my home because they could also say, "hooo our mom has Master's." They felt it was also an achievement that they appreciate...I did not only do it for my self but for my family... I am an asset to the community. I think I'm used more by the people in the community; they can see the difference.*



The importance of this sense of being an 'asset' cannot be underestimated in advancing a culture that values and appreciates women and their achievements beyond the domestic or traditional realm.

#### **5.1.4 (c) Improved Interpersonal Relationships**

Ruth: I have better understanding of people and how they do things...more open.

Tamar: it made me reflect and understand... I really couldn't understand other people. That interaction [with the supervisor] made me reflect on the interaction that I had with people at work and that developed me at work.

The co-researchers indicated an improvement and development in their interpersonal relationships, especially at work. The postgraduate study context provided a context for professional growth and personal growth. All of the co-researchers reported improved abilities within human relationships and the ability to reflect on their own interactions with peers was improved. This correlates with Brearley's (2003) findings that the experience of undertaking postgraduate research provides opportunities for learning about self.

#### **5.1.4 (e) Studying Further? Not just yet**

In terms of studying further in the field of Doctoral education, all the women responded positively to the idea. However, they also clearly said that they were 'not ready yet.' The reasons for their lack of readiness were varied. Deborah noted exhaustion in her response: 'I would say I'm interested in doctorate but I'm not ready for it. I'm so exhausted.'

Family, community and domestic commitments also featured in their reasons for delaying the possibility of undertaking Doctoral study.

Rebekah: I would say that a doctorate is in the pipeline but it's a very long pipeline...My daughter goes into matric next year so I am loath to start my own thing when she's in a crucial year herself.

Tamar: We are people's people in our communities...I do have thoughts about that [the Doctorate] at times...and then get, not frightened....but think of the time...frightened by the lot of work that one has to do...It (Doctorate) could be in the future.....

Ruth: Not next year for PhD, maybe 2010...I want to concentrate on my house.

However, an indication of a lack of confidence is also evinced, as well as concerns over the workload:

Rebekah: It [Doctorate] is on the distant agenda- perhaps this is where a lack of confidence creeps in - will I be able to do it on this level?

Tamar: I do have thoughts about that [the Doctorate] at times...and then get, not frightened....but think of the time...frightened by the lot of work that one has to do.

In order to increase the number of women completing Doctoral study, universities should find ways of encouraging women to overcome these reasons and ensuring that the institutional structure facilitates their progress.

#### **5.1.5 Support Needed**

In asking the women directly what they think universities should do to support them in undertaking higher degrees, it was hoped that the answers could

provide insight into how institutions can undertake this support. Two themes were developed from this data:

- a) Practical Needs
- b) Psychological Needs

#### **5.1.5 (a) Practical Needs**

Tamar: To do justice to the study you have to be in the right library and secondly, exposed to the internet.

Deborah: As part-time students, the university should ensure that there are bursaries instead of going for loans and not only for the fees. You spend a lot of money on Master's. Editing, for example. Printing, photocopying. When you come to the university it is better if you are given laptops and printers, because most of the time you are working at home. Also travelling costs...so much needs finances.

The practical needs expressed related to resources, such as libraries and the internet and finances in the form of bursaries, in order to cover not only fees but also other expenses such as travelling costs, printing and other operational costs related to undertaking higher degree study. This correlates with Davies, Osborne and Williams (2002) who report that lack of resources are a barrier for mature women students.

#### **5.1.5 (b) Psychological Needs**

The co-researchers indicated their need for psychological support.

Rebekah: If only that [contact sessions] could have continued throughout the period of the degree. That didn't happen any more and I missed that. I missed that tremendously. ... I suspect that had those

contact sessions continued I wouldn't have had a 6 months lapse...maybe I was to blame as well...I don't believe I was blameless.

This links up with their responses within the interviews in relation to the importance of support groups and fellow students, particularly in terms of avoiding isolation and loneliness. Literature notes that higher education infrastructure needs systems mutual support and reflective learning in order to develop supervisors and students (Brearley, 2003; McCormack, 2004; Conrad & Phillips, 1995). In addition, Conrad and Phillips (1995) advise that institutions should provide a supportive climate, specifically for women.

Deborah: You need to be assisted in so many things...you need a supportive framework ...because if you support your students you get students who are able to face the world. When you don't get support you just think, 'I must give up'. I didn't doubt my ability, but the problems that I encountered.

## **5.2 Unique Voices, Common Threads**

Each woman's story is unique as it clarifies the individual experiences concerning the process of undertaking a Master's degree. The stories told provide information that that might help future women in research in their endeavors to successfully navigate the often turbulent and murky waters of postgraduate education. Comparatively speaking, the stories also provide rich themes that extend our understanding of the experience of postgraduate research for mature women that should assist higher education management to provide a context that is enabling rather than disabling in terms of throughput.

From this study it appears that gender remains a site of struggle where women are expected to carry out a multitude of roles. From the co-researcher's contributions it is clear that there are multiple and multi-layered experiences and that undertaking a Master's is incredibly time consuming; time that women appeared to feel 'selfish' about needing.

Maclean (2001) recommends that women in higher education must work together with local and national bodies involved in defining the gender equity policies for the various sectors. Further that 'women in higher education must steer the focus of government policies and interventions toward redressing the imbalances and inequities (2001). However, without being part of the highest structures of decision-making, women's voices will not be heard. Power within these bodies is often constructed in such a way that certain high levels of education are required and without this women within these could be viewed as 'less' or 'window-dressing'.

Jansen et al., (2004, p. 1) note that research learning is complex and that any attempt to seek 'the right way' to prepare researchers is an error. This study does not intend to minimise the task that lies ahead. Hundreds of years of entrenched patriarchy will not be eradicated overnight. Collaboration with women in higher education internationally is vital for women's empowerment. Programs such as the Women in Leadership programme in Australia, the Association of Commonwealth Universities' Programme for Women in Higher Education Management, and the Women in Higher Education Network in the

United Kingdom are a few of the international programmes providing some good models (de la Rey, 2000).

### **5.3 Limitations**

Reinharz (1992) notes that researchers can only ever provide inexact knowledge of the experiences of others and that this approximation quality remains the limitation of all social research. This research provides my approximation of voicing what might otherwise remain unvoiced or invisible (Edwards & Ribbens, 1998). Feminist studies note that the researcher is never an objective transparent observer but an integral part of the research which is why I referred to the 'participants' as co-researchers and to the data as 'co-created'. My influence as the researcher has inevitably changed the text as it moved from the spoken to the written. This research should therefore be viewed in the knowledge that it is the approximate version of the co-researcher's voices through moments of their research journeys (Reinharz, 1992).

The site of the study was chosen for practical reasons and the sample is not representative of the mature postgraduate women student population. The analysis does however provide some insight into and understanding of the experiences of undertaking a Master's degree on a part-time basis. The intention is not to generalize the research results but instead, to invite the reader's engagement with the experience of mature women students.

Exploring the experiences may influence the general way in which institutional

policies are developed and rolled out in Higher Education Institutions. In so doing, this research may influence the ways in which faculties approach and support mature women students.

The study only focussed on a sample of heterosexual, South African, able women. A limitation of this study is that a large segment of the possible population was not represented, for example, 'foreign' women, disabled women and lesbian women. Future studies should attempt to include voices from a broader spectrum of women students.

### **5.3 Future Research**

Alice Kohler, authored an autobiographical book entitled 'A Solitary Woman' about her experiences of undertaking doctoral studies. The existence of these types of books points to interest within the broader reading audience of concerns and awareness of women's experiences within Higher Education. A literary study of themes found within these works would be an interesting point of departure from which to compare findings of this and other similar research studies.

In terms of methodology, future research could involve the use of focus groups. Focus groups are small groups active in the process of reflection and construction which give insight into experiences at a certain point in time (Letherby, 2003). An alternative definition is suggested by Reinharz (1992, p.

222) who refers to the focus group as a 'feminist group interview'. Oakley, as cited in Reinharz (1992, p. 223), believes that

the women's participation and the flow of ideas and information would be enhanced by being able to listen to each other's experience and to interact with each other. . . a group interview format facilitates women building on each other's ideas and augments the identification of patterns through their shared experience.

Creating spaces for opportunities for dialogue between the women in future studies would enhance the potential for the research to have a more participatory edge.

There are grounds for further research which explores these issues with women of different social-cultural backgrounds, sexualities, ethnicities and disabilities. Future studies should attempt to include voices from this wider field of women students.

#### **5.4 Conclusion**

This chapter established links between the issues as identified in the literature and as articulated by the women of their experiences of undertaking a Master's degree. Everything concerning the research questions was viewed through the women's voices and expressed in terms of my reflective writing. The experiences of postgraduate mature women are interwoven into all aspects of their lives, both personal and public. Focusing on gender alone will not capture the realities of women's experiences of higher education and issues of race also emerge through the data.



Each of the women's stories is unique as it illuminates individual's experience of addressing lived issues concerning their Master's research. A comparative analysis across the narratives provides rich data and informative themes which extend our understanding of the meaning of the mature student's experiences. Exploring both the disparities and connections between their experiences and those highlighted within the literature, provides a rich augmentation to the existing discourse around women in higher education.

This study has implications for future women postgraduate students and for the universities offering these degrees. Universities should take note of the recommendations made with the aim of improving the experiences of women, who form an important part of the academic community, and create 'female-friendly university systems' (Glazer-Raymo, 1987, p. 70). In addition, prospective women students can use this study to prepare themselves for the challenges and demands that the postgraduate experience presents. Employers, in this case such as the Department of Education, should also look to implementing policy which includes appropriate acknowledgement of the achievements of postgraduate students.

Brooks (1997) confirms the difficulty of generalizing about women's experience as if it were a coherent and unified whole. Within higher education contexts, 'women's experience is diverse, reflecting issues of age, nationality, class, race, ethnicity, parenthood and academic position' (p. 59). I acknowledge that this research only tells part of the story. Thus, the experiences offered by the co-researchers in this study should not be

understood as being representative of all mature women postgraduate students.

However, Frost & Taylor (1996, p. 217) write that it is important to 'create spaces in our lives in which we are invited to step back in the company of others and look at our 'balancing acts' in some way and be vulnerable to each other and the moment.' My role as the researcher has been merely to create the space. The co-researchers have gifted their voices and their vulnerability. This research provides a rendering of experiences from which readers of the study are invited to learn.

Women's development through education has been the overriding issue within this research study. As cited in Anthony and Harper (1902) an extract from Elizabeth Cady Stanton's speech 'On Solitude to Self' speaks to this and makes a fitting conclusion to this study:

The strongest reason for giving woman all the opportunities for higher education, for the full development of her forces of mind and body...is the solitude and personal responsibility of her own individual life.

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## **Appendices**

Appendix A: Introductory Letter

Appendix B: Semi-structured Interview Schedule

Appendix C: Overview of Questions

## **Appendix A: Introductory Letter**

Dear

The purpose of this letter is to introduce myself by explaining the research I am undertaking and to invite you to participate in the study.

The purpose of the research is to explore the lives of mature women students, who have recently completed postgraduate studies. The working title of the research is *Her Master's: The Experiences of Mature Women in Postgraduate Study*

The issue that I plan to explore is how academic life influences and is influenced by family life, relationships and roles in the domestic sphere. Related research questions are:

- How do students cope with their multiple life roles?
- What, if anything, can universities do to support students?

The results of this study are to form my thesis submission to the University of Fort Hare for the award of the degree, Master of Education. In raising awareness around the experience of women in higher education the study will create a space for graduate women students to be heard. The study will also add to the growing body of research in Higher Education.

As I mentioned above, the purpose of this letter is to invite participation in the study. It is anticipated that the research will be undertaken by means of an individual interview between each participant and me.

Please note that there is absolutely no binding commitment to continuing if at any stage you would prefer to discontinue. The sources of all information and opinions provided will remain anonymous to everyone barring myself.

In replying to this e-mail, please feel free to ask any questions. I thank you for your time and look forward to your reply.

Yours faithfully,

Mary Ann Hood

## **Appendix B: Semi-structured Interview Schedule**

*Thank you for volunteering to participate in this study. I want to assure you that the interviews and anything you share will remain confidential. Please note that you may withdraw at any time from the study.*

*As I explained in the letter, the study is about your experience of undertaking a Master's degree. The questions that I will be asking will need you to describe, in as much detail as possible, the story of your Master's experience.*

*In our interview I would like you to give particular attention to the critical events and challenges you have faced and the way in which these events have influenced your academic, professional and personal development.*

*This is quite a mouthful, and so I have some questions that will hopefully facilitate this process. Please feel free to ask me to clarify what I mean at any time.*

1. I would like to know what motivated you to do a Master's...why you wanted to do the degree in the first place?
2. I'd like to know a little about your background ... how you came to be interested in your field of study.
3. Regarding your expectations of the Master's experience, if you think back to the days before you registered for the Master's degree, can you describe what the degree represented to you then and what you thought the process would be like?
4. As you think back to experiences are there particular people, experiences or events that stand out in your mind as being significant?



5. What impact has your Master's experience had on your relationship with others in your life? (eg., your family, partner, employer, colleagues, etc.)
6. Can you identify aspects of your Master's experience that might be described as your 'highest high' and your 'lowest low'?
7. Can you describe any experiences you have had with regard to your own confidence in completing your work?
8. What role have finances, or the lack thereof, played in your Master's experience? Have funding issues been central to particular hardships that you experienced in your Master's degree?
9. What would have made the Master's experience more meaningful for you?
10. What do you know now that you wished you'd known or been told before you began your research?
11. If you were to begin a Master's now, what things might you do differently?
12. In what ways have you changed and in what ways do you see yourself differently as a result of your Master's experience?
13. Some people consider the next step to be a Doctorate. How would you feel about registering for a Doctorate?

*Thank you so much for your participation in this interview. It has been most helpful.*

## Appendix C: Overview of Questions

*Note: Number questions are the Research Questions. Questions from semi-structured interview schedule are in the block.*

1. What motivates mature women students to embark on postgraduate study in the form of a Master's degree?

Question 1: I would like to know what motivated you to do a Master's...why you wanted to do the degree in the first place?

Question 2: I'd like to know a little about your background ... how you came to be interested in your field of study.

Question 3: Regarding your expectations of the Master's experience, if you think back to the days before you registered for the Master's degree, can you describe what the degree represented to you then and what you thought the process would be like?

2. How do mature women students manage the complex process of postgraduate study within daily life?

Question 4: As you think back to experiences are there particular people, experiences or events that stand out in your mind as being significant?

Question 5: What impact has your Master's experience had on your relationship with others in your life? (for example, your family, partner, employer, colleagues, etc.)

3. What emotional highs and lows do the students experience?

Question 6: Can you identify aspects of your Masters experience that might be described as your 'highest high' and your 'lowest low'?

Question 7: Can you describe any experiences you have had with regard to your own confidence in completing your work?

Question 8: What role have finances, or the lack thereof, played in your Master's experience? Have funding issues been central to particular hardships that you experienced in your Master's degree?

4. How do students feel about themselves on completion of the degree?

Question 12: In what ways have you changed and in what ways do you see yourself differently as a result of your Master's experience?

Question 13: Some people consider the next step to be a doctorate. How would you feel about registering for a doctorate?

5. What can universities do to support mature women students in undertaking higher education?

Question 9: What would have made the Master's experience more meaningful for you?

Question 10: What do you know now that you wished you'd known or been told before you began your research?

Question 11: If you were to begin a Master's now, what things might you do differently?